RESEARCH ARTICLE

The Shape of 1979

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This article fills in the gap in my series of articles quantitatively surveying the stylistic changes in American feature films from 1939 to 1999, which have been previously published in The New Review of Film and Television Studies.

Keywords: film style; statistical analysis; US films of 1979, Woody Allen

The Sample

The IMdb records 394 American feature films that were released in 1979 (including co-productions), and of these, 110 were available on DVD or video tape at the time this research was carried out. The available films were scattered fairly evenly across the output of the studios and genres, so a random sample of twenty of these films was taken. This is the resulting list:-

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Title	Director	Production Co.	
An Almost Perfect Affair	Michael Ritchie	Paramount	
The Amityville Horror	Stuart Rosenberg	AIP	
The Black Stallion	Carroll Ballard	Omni Zoetrope	
The Champ	Franco Zeffirelli	MGM	
Cuba	Richard Lester	Holmby Pictures	
Dracula	John Badham	Universal/Mirisch	
Driller Killer	Abel Ferrara	Navaron Films	
French Postcards	Willard Huyck	Paramount / Geria	
The Frisco Kid	Robert Aldrich	Warner Bros.	
The Great Santini	Lewis John Carlino	Bing Crosby	
H.O.T.S.	Gerald Seth Sindell	Great American Dream Machine	
Hometown U.S.A.	Max Baer Jr.	Baer/Camras	
King Frat	Ken Wiederhorn	Mad Makers, inc.	
Manhattan	Woody Allen	Jack Rollins & Charles J. Joffe	
Meteor	Ronald Neame	AIP	
Pacific Inferno	Rolf Bayer	Arbee/Nathaniel	
The Rose	Mark Rydell	20th. Century Fox	
Tourist Trap	David Schmoeller	Charles Band	
Winter Kills	William Richert	Winter Gold	

This sample in its turn also shows a fairly even selection across the studios and the genres, given that by 1979 the production of independent companies greatly outnumbered that of the 'major' studios. The number of films actually produced by the majors (as opposed to distributed by them) was down to 43 in 1979, and for each major, the number produced was less than 10 films. For a more perfect random selection there should be a film from Columbia, and only one from AIP, but that is the way

the dice rolled. The co-productions with other countries include one with Geria Productions, a German company. This represents the beginning of what is now a major trend, whereby many films that superficially appear to be American are actually co-produced, or even wholly produced, by German companies. Notable content features of the selection, and of the time, are two cheap and stupid college fraternity/sorority 'comedies', and yet another rip-off of *American Graffiti*. The first wave of blaxploitation movies had expired by 1979, but *Pacific Inferno*, starring Jim Brown, is a dying echo from such films. The child audience did not get nearly as much attention in 1979 as it does now, but we do have *The Black Stallion* in this sample, which is about right for the year. The horror market is well represented, and *Driller Killer* was leading on to the new heights of viciousness that we enjoy today.

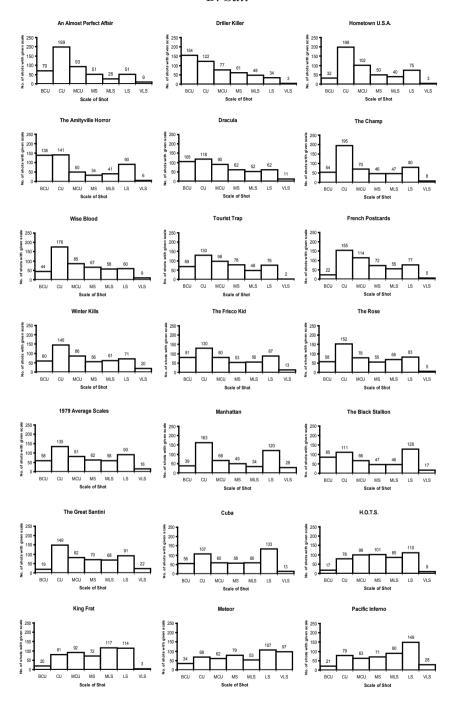
Method

My analytical procedure has been described in the previous articles in this series, but briefly it depends on ripping a DVD or videotape of the film to hard disk, and then using a non-linear editor to mark the boundaries of all the shots in the film, before making a series of further passes through the film to count the totals of the other various stylistic variables that I study. These variables are derived from the terms used by film-makers in their construction of motion picture films. The sequential lengths of the shots in each of the twenty films in the sample are not studied in this paper, but they are available on the Cinemetrics web site at www.cinemetrics.lv

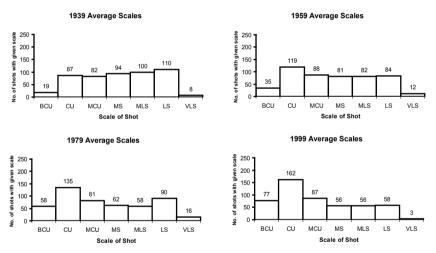
Scale of Shot

The Scale or Closeness of Shot is measured, as before, by the size of the human figure relative to the height of the frame. They are as follows: Big Close Up (BCU) shows head only, Close Up (CU) shows head and shoulders, Medium Close Up (MCU) includes body from the waist up, Medium Shot (MS) includes from just below the hip to above the head of upright actors, Medium Long Shot (MLS) shows the body from the knee upwards, Long Shot (LS) shows at least the full height of the body, and Very Long Shot (VLS) shows the actor small in the frame. As usual, the figures quoted are the number of shots of each scale per 500 shots in the film concerned. You can see the size of these shot scales illustrated in a diagram on page 253 in my book Moving Into Pictures (Salt 2006). Below are the graphs showing the number of shots of each scale per 500 shots in each of the films in the sample. They are ordered from the film

shots in each of the films in the sample. They are ordered from the film with the greatest concentration on close shots of the actors to that with the most emphasis on distant shots. This ordering used the ratio between the number of shots with scales greater then Medium Shot to the number of shots with scale less than Medium Shot for each film. A crude measure, but I like to keep things simple.



A graph of the average shot scales taken over the 20 films is also included, as are the average shot scales for 1939, 1959, and 1999. It is obvious that the shot scale distribution for Winter Kills, The Frisco Kid, and The Rose are quite close to the 1979 average, and four other films are not that far away from that average either. At the extremes are An Almost Perfect Affair and Driller Killer, which have the closeness of shot more typical for 1999 (and for that matter today), and at the other extreme of distant shooting of the action, are Meteor and Pacific Inferno. Of the last two, the former features a very large number of shots of the giant missile arrays in orbit which are aimed at the threatening meteor of the title, and the latter has plenty of Long Shots of World War II in the Pacific, both actual and cheaply staged. The extreme close shooting of An Almost Perfect Affair is of course a matter of choice, since it was perfectly acceptable in 1979 to shoot a romantic drama from rather further back, as indicated by the results here for French Postcards. The scale of shot profile for Manhattan is very distinctive, with its strong concentration on just two shot scales. Close Up and Long Shot, which is indicative of an auteur at work, as we shall see.



The average Scale of Shot distributions for 1939, 1959 and 1999, which are reproduced from my previous articles 'The Shape of 1939' (Salt 2013), 'The Shape of 1959' (Salt 2009) and 'The Shape of 1999' (Salt 2004), taken together with that for 1979, show how the general trend in American cinema towards closer shooting has continuously developed from 1939. Just taking the category of CU, the average for this goes from 87 per 500 shots in 1939 to 119 in 1959, to 135 in 1979, and finally to 162 in 1999, while the more distant shot scales decrease. The other stylistic variables have also shifted in general over the decades, though the changes in the use of camera movement are not so strongly marked.

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Camera Movement

	Pan	Tilt	Pan w. Tilt	Track	Tr. w. Pan & Tilt	Crane	Zoom	Zoom w. Move	Total
An Almost Perfect Affair	22	3	14	6	11	1	2	1	60
The Amityville Horror	23	13	29	10	18	1	18	4	116
The Black Stallion	65	10	46	46	17	2	1	0	187
The Champ	31	13	35	17	34	7	16	10	163
Cuba	45	7	21	2	3	0	6	2	86
Dracula	25	11	21	32	33	4	2	1	129
Driller Killer	27	10	25	13	26	0	14	3	118
French Postcards	25	14	27	7	17	0	4	4	98
The Frisco Kid	29	5	19	11	3	0	2	1	70
The Great Santini	31	7	24	13	17	1	1	1	95
H.O.T.S.	26	16	23	12	18	1	12	7	115
Hometown U.S.A.	44	12	10	34	11	0	2	0	113
King Frat	36	8	13	7	7	0	1	1	73
Manhattan	32	0	5	21	21	0	2	0	81
Meteor	10	5	30	29	50	5	1	3	133
Pacific Inferno	41	7	26	7	9	0	2	2	94
The Rose	30	9	25	13	25	2	16	4	124
Tourist Trap	14	5	12	7	11	2	0	0	51
Winter Kills	27	12	16	11	9	4	2	1	82
Wise Blood	37	2	43	12	26	0	4	7	131
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Average for 1939	47	5	16	20	29	3	0	0	118
Average for 1959	38	6	15	21	27	3	1	0	110
Average for 1979	31	9	23	16	18	2	5	3	106
Average for 1999	16	5	16	20	30	4	2	1	93

Opposite is a table showing the proportions of the different types of camera movement in my sample from 1939. The categories of camera movement are pan, tilt, pan with tilt, track, track with pan and/or tilt, crane, and zoom. Zoom shots can be either straight in and out, or in or out combined with camera movement. All of these are fairly self-explanatory, but my category of simple tracking shot includes only camera dolly movements in a straight line, including those sideways to the camera direction and subject, which is sometimes referred to as 'crabbing'. Any tracking on a curved path invariably contains panning movements as well. Camera movements of small extent which are made to keep the actors well-framed as they move about a little are not counted, as these have been done effectively automatically by camera operators for the last eighty years at least, and are hence without significance. The same applies to small dolly adjustments of a foot or so made for the same reason. Also, small changes in focal length are not counted as zooms. Camera movements are normalized to the number per 500 shots for the film being dealt with. The table of camera movements also includes a final column adding up all the camera of all kinds per 500 shots for the film in question. There are also four final rows in the table which gives the average number of camera moves per 500 shots taken over the whole 20 films in this 1979 sample, and the same for my samples from 1939, 1959 and 1999 used in the previous articles.

There are no large changes in the amounts of camera movement used over the 60 years from 1939 to 1999, with the exception of simple panning moves. Panning has decreased from about 47 pans per 500 shots, or nearly half of all camera movements in 1939, to 38 per 500 shots in 1959, then 31 per 500 in 1979, and then to only 16 pans per 500 shots in 1999. The last figure represents only one sixth of the various types of camera movements used in 1999. In the 1979 sample, most films stay fairly close to the norm for that year, but a few stand out. The Black Stallion is special in having much more than the average amount of panning, considering both simple pans, and pans combined with a tilt. This follows fairly inevitably from following the unpredictable boy-horse interaction, and this feature crops up in a slightly weaker way in the other action subjects; The Champ and Pacific Inferno. But where this combination of moves might not be expected from the subject matter, as in Wise Blood, it has to be taken as a directorial idiosyncrasy. At the other extreme, An Almost Perfect Affair and Tourist Trap have markedly less camera movement than the norm; which would appear to represent a stylistic choice.

Although the Steadicam camera support device had been in use for a few years before 1979, the only one of the films in the sample that used it seems to be *The Rose*. Even in this case, a large proportion of the moving camera shots are done in the conventional way with the camera on a dolly. There is also some simple hand-held shooting in car interiors in

this particular film, but agitated camera movement is not used to ramp up the excitement as it would be in many more recent films on rock concert subjects.

The most conspicuous use of hand-held camera is in *Driller Killer*, where the vast majority of the shots are hand-held, though the camera operator does not go out of his way to draw attention to this. As I expected, there is a noticeable increase in the use of zoom shots in this sample, though this stylistic fashion had retreated again by 1999, as the figures indicate. Useful zoom lenses were already available in 1959, but I think there was a sentiment against their use at that date. The inrease in the quality and availability of zoom lenses in the nineteen-sixties no doubt encouraged this trend, but the fact that it has subsided again more recently shows that it was basically due to the conscious will of film-makers in 1979. Also, the use of zooming in combination with camera movement was another innovation of the seventies, as the figures above also indicate.

Average Shot Lengths, Reverse Angles and Point of View shots Below is a table showing the ASLs, as well as percentages of Reverse Angles (RAs), Point of View shots (POVs), and Inserts for my sample.

Title	ASL	% RA	% POV	% INS
An Almost Perfect Affair	4.2	64	12	7
The Amityville Horror	5.5	33	7	18
The Black Stallion	4.9	27	14	30
The Champ	7.2	48	10	5
Cuba	4.9	25	5	3
Dracula	5	40	8	15
Driller Killer	6.6	31	15	19
French Postcards	6.7	50	7	3
The Frisco Kid	5.1	44	8	7
The Great Santini	5.4	50	11	6
H.O.T.S.	5.3	28	8	12
Hometown U.S.A.	4.9	36	7	5
King Frat	6.4	23	5	10
Manhattan	18.1	42	1	22
Meteor	5.7	29	12	34
Pacific Inferno	5.1	15	3	14
The Rose	7.5	41	7	4
Tourist Trap	5.4	47	15	22
Winter Kills	6.1	63	7	6
Wise Blood	9.8	65	13	6

Although the ASLs for my 1979 sample are spread over the range from 4 seconds to 18 seconds, there is a particular concentration in the region of 5 and 6 seconds. The vastly larger collection of figures analysed in *Film Style and Technology* show how the figures in the table fit in satisfactorily with the fairly smooth decline of this quantity from the nineteen-fifties to the present.

The figures for the percentage of reverse shots are spread across the range from 15% to 65% fairly evenly, but with some concentration in the range from 30% to 50%, around the mean value of 40%. Very high percentages of RAs, around 65% and well above the norm, can only occur as a stylistic choice by the director. At the other end of the spectrum, we have the low values, 27% for The Black Stallion, 25% for Cuba, 23% for King Frat, and just 15% for Pacific Inferno. Small number of reverse angles can be expected from very cheap film-making, as in the latter two films, as the setting-up of reverses takes longer than grabbing everything from the 'front'. In cheap film-making the number of camera set-ups has to be minimized, and this means shooting as much as possible from the same camera position, so that the master shot covers the whole group of actors in the scene in either Full Shot or Medium Long Shot, maybe with some panning, and the close shots that are to be cut into the master shot are filmed by just changing to a longer lens, not changing the camera position. This means of course that such close shots cannot be reverse shots.

However, the low percentage of reverse angles in *The Black Stallion* is due to the peculiar nature of this film, which is entirely about the interaction between a boy and a horse, which is difficult to control and restage for continuity in reverse angle shooting. That leaves the low value in *Cuba* to be explained, and the only way to account for this is that it is Dick Lester's favoured choice of scene dissection.

POV shots are very useful for emphasising the psychological attitude of a protagonist, as their greatest user, Alfred Hitchcock, has demonstrated. But the appropriate situation for their use has to be written into the script, and this is where many film-makers fall down. The high values for POV shots in my 1979 sample occur in *The Black Stallion*, *Driller Killer* and *Tourist Trap*. In *The Black Stallion* the POVs are mostly of the horse of the title, and from the position of the boy who is trying to handle him throughout the film. In *Driller Killer*, the protagonist, who is an artist made demented by his lack of success and by loud pop music (according to the script), spends much time looking at his paintings and his victims. Though not in a very well-worked-out way. And in *Tourist Trap* we have yet another of the maniacal sadists so popular nowadays, but in this case, it is his nubile young victims whose POVs are privileged, which is the right way to go about it. One might expect a higher percentage of POVs in

the other horror films, *Dracula* and *The Amityville Horror*, but in the first case one could speculate that the director was somewhat handicapped by the stage origin of his script, and in the second by the fact that the victims were not actually being really menaced by anything very much.

Below I give the average values of these quantities for the whole 1979 sample in bold face, surrounded three rows giving the averages of the same quantities for the 1939, 1959 and 1999 samples that I studied in my previous articles.

	ASL	% RA	% POV	% INS
1939 Average values	8.8	30	7	5
1959 Average values	9.3	40	10	11
1979 Average values	6.5	40	9	12
1999 Average values	5.5	40	8	10

The mean value of reverse shots remains the same from 1959 to 1999. The use of Point of View (POV) shots and Insert shots has increased a bit from the end of the 'thirties to 1959, and has stayed fairly constant since then.

Dialogue Editing

It was obviously worth comparing the dialogue editing of these 1979 films with those made more recently which are studied in my article *Reaction Time: How to Edit Movies* published a couple of years ago in The New Review of Film and Television Studies. The aim in my *Reaction Time* article was to study whether individual film editors had a personal style, and the editing of dialogue scenes was chosen for examination because such scenes are the only type of scene common to all sound movies, whereas only a few films have car chase scenes or musical stagings and so on that require their own special sort of editing.

The quantities studied were fully explained in the previous article, with the use of helpful diagrams. The most common type of dialogue cut from one shot to the next inside a dialogue scene is that made at the same point in time on the picture and sound tracks, somewhere inside the gap between one speaker finishing speaking, and another replying. This sort of cut is measured by counting the number of frames from the end of the last speech sound in the outgoing shot to the picture cut (length 'A'), and the number of frames from the picture cut to the first speech sound (length 'B') in the incoming shot. An alternative description of this measurement is that the A-length runs from the beginning of the pause between the voices of the two speakers to the picture cut, and the B-length runs from the picture cut to the end of the pause, when the second speaker begins to reply.

In the next most common type of dialogue cut, the sound of the voice of the person seen in the outgoing shot continues under the picture of the person who is eventually going to reply in the incoming shot, until that person replies. Again, I measure the exact placement of this cut in the picture with respect to the speeches by the lengths A and B from the cut in the picture to the end (or start) of the sounds, though in this case A is given a negative value. This sort of cut is nowadays called an 'L-edit', or 'L-cut'. The converse of this, and least common dialogue edit, has the sound of the speaker who is about to be shown full face in the next shot being first heard under the end of the outgoing shot. This is called a 'J-edit' or 'J-cut'.

There can also be cutaways to a listener in the middle of a speech, and the cuts to and from these reaction shots is counted as a percentage of the total cuts within the dialogue scene. The pause length is the distance in frames between the last sound of the first person's speech and the first sound of the second person's reply, without regard for where the cut in the picture occurs between the two shots. Remember that 24 frames corresponds to one second, so 12 frames is a pause of half a second, and so on.

Film	Editor	% of L-edits	% of J-edits	Average Pause (in frames)	% of Reaction shots	% A-lengths<6 frames
Cuba	John Victor-Smith	9	8	12	14	57
Dracula	John Bloom	21	21	11	25	51
French Postcards	Carol Littleton	12	15	14	24	46
The Great Santini	Housely Stevenson	17	11	12	31	60
Manhattan	Susan E. Morse	8	10	13	8	39
The Rose	O'Meara & Wolfe	28	16	12	38	53
Winter Kills	David Bretherton	14	4	13	10	85
Wise Blood	Roberto Silvi	22	14	12	47	65
Average for 1939 s	ample	13	6	15	16	61
Average for 1959 s	ample	15	5	24	22	50
Average for 1979 sample		16	12	12	25	57
Average for 1999 s	ample	12	10	14	44	67

Variation of the pause length is the principal means of accentuating the drama inherent in the script for a film scene, though increasing the pause length cannot create drama out of nothing, anymore than a POV shot can create drama out of nothing. The second most useful device for accentuating the drama is the use of reaction shots.

An unusual feature of the pause length, not to be seen in my samples from other years, is that the spread of values is only one frame around the mean of 12 frames. As I remarked in *The Shape of 1939* (Salt, 2013), there is this strange historical movement in the pause length across sixty years. The average pause length for my four samples increased substantially, from 15 frames to 24 frames from 1939 to 1959, before dropping back to 12 frames in 1979 and 14 frames in 1999. At the same time, the percentage of dialogue cuts made within 6 frames after the first speaker finished dropped from 61 percent to 50 percent and then went up to 67 percent across the same years. One could put this in more ordinary words by saying that the cutting of dialogue got markedly slacker (or looser) on the way from 1939 to 1959, even though the general cutting rates throughout the whole length of the films (as shown by the mean ASLs) were quite similar in those two years. And then the cutting of dialogue tightened up again in the next twenty years to 1979, as the cutting rate increased.

Jump Cuts

There are two basic classes of jump cuts, which leave out a chunk of story time between the shots on each side of the cut, and these are cuts from one scene to the next, and alternatively those cuts leaving out time inside a scene. There were no jump cuts in my sample of 20 American movies from 1939, and just a few in 1959. However, by 1979 all the movies in my sample contain jump cuts, and some films proceed from scene to scene entirely by jump cuts. A comparison of the figures for 1979 and 1999 is contained in the tables below.

1979 Films	Jumps inside scenes	Jumps between scenes
An Almost Perfect Affair	18	27
The Amityville Horror	2	19
The Black Stallion	25	46
The Champ	4	15
Cuba	0	11
Dracula	4	28
Driller Killer	4	40
French Postcards	7	31
The Frisco Kid	2	42

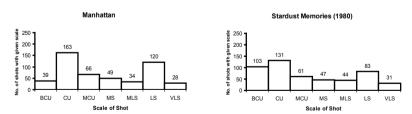
1979 Films	Jumps inside scenes	Jumps between scenes
The Great Santini	1	31
H.O.T.S.	13	21
Hometown U.S.A.	18	11
King Frat	1	11
Manhattan	0	70
Meteor	1	35
Pacific Inferno	3	15
The Rose	29	0
Tourist Trap	3	3
Winter Kills	5	43
Wise Blood	1	17
1999 Films	Jumps inside scenes	Jumps between scenes
10 Things I Hate About You	5	46
Angela's Ashes	52	225
The Blair Witch Project	25	78
Brokedown Palace	6	41
Crazy in Alabama	27	25
Deep Blue Sea	3	13
Detroit Rock City	35	6
EDtv	7	36
The Insider	7	67
Jakob the Liar	16	21
Life	9	42
Love Stinks	13	66
Man on the Moon	36	76
Mating Habits of Earthbound Humans	44	51
The Minus Man	10	54
The Sixth Sense	21	23
SLC Punk!	173	92
Snow Falling on Cedars	73	294
The Talented Mr. Ripley	22	109
Three to Tango	24	40

The average number of jump cuts between scenes has increased from 26 to 70 from 1979 to 1999, but the number of jump cuts inside scenes has increased even more, from 7 to 30. Although the amount of jump-cutting of both kinds for the 1979 sample is markedly less than for 1999, there are already some films, namely *Manhattan* and *Driller Killer* that almost entirely use jump cuts to move from one scene to the next. *The Black Stallion, The Frisco Kid*, and *Winter Kills* only have a handful of dissolves and fades for scene transitions, and the rest of the films use both jump-cuts and traditional transitions between scenes in various proportions. It is important to note that I do not count a cut to a parallel train of action, which can be understood as going on at the same time, as a jump cut.

Auteur Practice

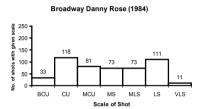
All the distinctive features that I study statistically, and which single out particular films, do not always tell the whole story. For instance, I can see a subtle feature of Richard Lester's scene dissection in *Cuba*, which involves a tendency to use longer focal length lenses than would be usual. One could try to analyse this feature, but unfortunately it is very difficult to make anything better than a rough estimate of the focal length being used for a shot by just looking at the film. I can see a more obvious peculiarity in John Huston's *Wise Blood*. The large number of panning shots in this film tend to show an actor beginning in something like Medium Shot, and then walking in close shot past the camera as it pans with them, before continuing the shot in another area of the set at a greater distance again. This sometimes happens in other director's work, but not a consistently as it does in this film.

Woody Allen's *Manhattan* obviously separates itself strongly from the general run of American features by its slow cutting rate, as do his other films from *Annie Hall* (1977) onwards, when he turned from 'anything for a laugh' to making ART. So here is an auteur style check using *Stardust Memories* (1980) for comparison. First the Scale of Shot profiles for the two films:



The profiles are not as completely similar as one would wish, but they are fairly close. They both have the high proportion of Close Ups and Long Shots, but the significant difference is that *Stardust Memories* has

a marked excess of Big Close Ups. One could speculate that this excess of BCUs is intentionally related to the subject matter of the film, which gives a much more central place to the Woody Allen character, and also involves an evocation of his mental state and his subjective fantasies. The scientific attitude requires that other alternative explanations for this phenomenon also be considered, and since the photographer of both films was Gordon Willis, the other person involved in framing the image has to be checked. This is the camera operator, who was Dick Mingalone for *Stardust Memories*, whereas Fred Schuler operated on *Manhattan*. This possible explanation can be disposed of by looking at *Broadway Danny Rose* (1984), on which Dick Mingalone operated again.



Although the scale of shot profile for *Broadway Danny Rose* has a general similarity to the other two films, the proportion of BCUs in particular is down to a similar level to that for *Manhattan*. In any case, Woody Allen checked the compositions in his films, according to a statement to Stig Björkman on page 113 of 'Woody Allen on Woody Allen' (Björkman, 1993).

Summing Up

All the measures show that the major stylistic variables for 1979 fit smoothly in between the values they had in 1959 and 1999. Indeed, with the exception of Average Shot Lengths and amount of zooming, these variables have a steady uni-directional progress all the way from 1939 to 1999. The graph of ASL is of course given a peak around 1950 by the Great Long Take Craze of the 'forties, and I have just shown in my results, the Little Zoom Craze of the 'seventies also upsets linearity slightly. So this survey completes my demonstration of the way stylistic change has been continuous and gradual from the nineteen-thirties to the present.

Ideally, I should next give more complete coverage of stylistic changes for this span of time, filling in with samples from 1949, 1969, and 1989, but I have not intention of doing that at the moment, as I think I have satisfactorily completed my demonstration of the way in which stylistic change is continuous, and does not proceed by sudden changes, as people who suffer from 'pigeon-hole' thinking believe.

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