Editing

Editing is the process of arranging all the images in their correct order so that the narrative makes sense, the dialogue flows and you can see what you need to see, when you need to see it. Unlike the other elements of film form, **editing is unique to film**.

In this section you will gain an understanding of the conventions of continuity editing and how filmmakers experiment with editing to develop further layers of meaning.

Continuity editing

Continuity editing, or invisible editing as it is sometimes known, is the dominant editing technique in mainstream cinema. Continuity editing is designed to make the transitions between shots as seamless as possible so as not to draw attention to the film's construction, instead allowing the audience to become immersed in the narrative. The techniques outlined here are commonplace in mainstream films.

Taken altogether, the editing of shots in a scene gives the impression of an entire continuous narrative.

- An **establishing shot** is usually the point of entry into a scene, which will typically begin with a long-shot or establishing shot that establishes a location for the characters, before focusing on one or more of them and their actions.
- A **shot/reverse shot** editing pattern is used between two people in conversation. Filmed as over-the-shoulder shots, the editor will cut between the two to create the dynamism of the conversation. The camera could be focusing on either the person speaking, or the reaction of the person listening.
- An **eyeline match** is used in conversations where the two characters have been shot in close-up. To indicate that they are looking at each other, the eyeline has to match the eye height of the other character. If this doesn't match you will spot it.
- The **180° rule** is used to ensure that we understand where characters/objects are in relation to each other: the angle between any two sequential shots should not exceed 180°. Not following this is called **crossing the line**.
- The **30° rule** is a general principle that two consecutive shots should have at least a 30° variance between them. Breaking this rule is known as a **jump-cut**.
- **Cross-cutting** is the parallel editing of two or more events in an alternating pattern, for example the hero coming to the rescue/victim in trouble. Cutting between two scenes heightens interest/suspense, provides conflict and depicts contrast.
- **Match on action:** most editors prefer to cut between two shots on action, such as the actor reaching for a drink and drinking it. These two different actions and may be framed differently but the editing will make it seem as though it is a continuous movement.
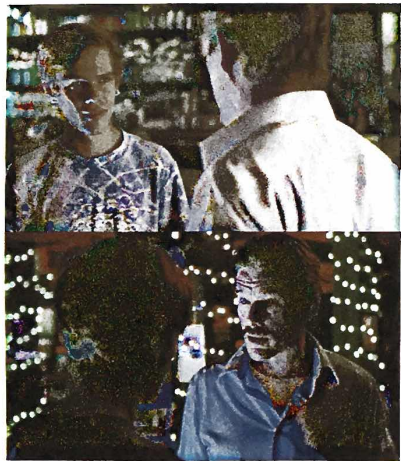
Boyhood (Linklater, 2015) shot/reverse shot

Shot transitions

Editors need to make creative decisions regarding **shot transitions** – how you move from one shot to the next. These transitions can manipulate narrative time and space, serve the film's aesthetic style, create mood, develop narrative and character, and generate further meaning.

There are several different ways of achieving these transitions, but most films use the cut, the dissolve and the fade.

Cut

A cut is a straight edit from one image to another with nothing in between. Cuts allow you to travel great distances in time and setting in an instant. Alternatively, they can show you the same action from different angles in a matter of seconds.

Fade

A fade is when the picture emerges out of, or disappears into, black or white. It is most often used at the end of a major scene or act and is the filmic equivalent to the end of a chapter in a book.

Dissolve

A dissolve is when one image overlaps another. As the scene ends you are watching 'image A'; slowly 'image B' emerges from it, until it overwhelms 'image A', which fades away completely. 'Image B' signals the start of a new scene, which could feature different characters or location. This can be particularly effective when creating a feeling of time passing, or to make a connection between two characters or a character and an object or setting.

Other transitions

The following transitions offer a more experimental approach, which can be used to develop further meaning or support a film's aesthetic.

Wipe

A wipe is the most artificial and conspicuous transition. A line travels across the screen from left to right, or vice versa, wiping out the first image and replacing it with a second. *Hulk* (Lee, 2003) uses an array of shot transitions inspired by comic-book panels. There are more subtle uses of a wipe, if something moves across the screen (such as a car) in the same direction as the wipe, at the same speed, then the wipe isn't noticed.

Match-cut

A match-cut is when the we cut from one image to something that looks similar or from one action to a similar action. The most cited example of a match-cut is in *2001: A Space Odyssey* (Kubrick, 1968), when the film opens with a prehistoric ape using a bone as a weapon, which he throws into the air and the shot cuts to a satellite (similar in shape) in space. In one edit we have been transported thousands of years into the future.

Match dissolve

A match dissolve uses the same juxtaposition of images, but dissolves between the two. At the end of the shower scene in *Psycho* (Hitchcock, 1960), we see the victim's blood running into the plughole, dissolving to the black pupil of her dead eye.

Jump-cut

A jump-cut is the result of breaking the 30° rule. This gives a scene an edgy, uneasy feeling, as though we haven't seen everything. Its use will startle the viewer, drawing attention to this action. This was a particular technique employed by Jean-Luc Godard, in *Vivre sa vie*, when Nana, hearing a sound outside, gets up and, as the camera pans across the café, there is a series of jump-cuts edited to the sound and rhythm of machine-gun fire outside.

Freeze-frame

This is where a single frame is held on screen for a period of time. It can be used throughout a film as punctuation, for emphasis, or to hold an important image or character's response in the viewer's mind. If the film ends on a freeze-frame this may leave the film open to interpretation. A freeze-frame calls attention to the filmmaking process. These can be seen in the opening sequence of *Trainspotting* (Boyle, 1996).

Editing:
Time and space

Editing is used in the organisation of time and space, both within individual sequences and throughout the film, in order to create narrative coherence. It can be used in the following ways:

- **Time** may appear in a **linear** form, where the story starts and progresses forwards until its resolution, which is known as **continuity of narrative**.

- **Near chronological order** is when the film starts in the present day, and then goes back in time to the beginning of the story and continues forwards in one long flashback until the two points meet, when it can either end or continue on. This is often used to show a character at a moment of peril, joy or anguish, with the flashback used to show how they reached this point.

- **Discontinuity of narrative** presents the story in a **non-linear** manner, which can be achieved in in a number of ways.

  - A film is **reversed** when it starts at the end narrative and works backwards to the beginning. This is complex narrative structure and is rarely used; key examples are *Memento* (Nolan, 2000) and *Irréversible* (Noé, 2003).

  - **Flashbacks** can be used to temporarily disrupt the narrative by inserting a scene from the narrative past in an otherwise linear narrative or as the overarching structure. This structure is usually used to fill in the back-story of the characters.

  - **Flashforwards**, which are also known as prolepsis, move the action from the present to the future. Flashforwards are used less often, and it may not be instantly apparent that we are being shown the future rather than the past. *Arrival* (Villeneuve, 2016) has a good example of the use of a flashforward.

  - **Dreams and fantasies** are inserted in the narrative to offer insights into a character's emotional status or to shed light on the past.


(+) Further information

Cinematic time and space

Films can go anywhere in time and space in a moment. Time may be compressed or expanded: sped up or slowed down; remain in the present or go forwards and backwards. Space may be shortened or stretched; moved nearer or further away; presented in a true or false perspective; or be completely remade into a setting that only exists in film time; space may be eliminated, created or presented in a manner that will help the audience comprehend. It may be real or imagined, enlarged or reduced.

Case study: Near chronological narrative structure
City of God (Meirelles, 2002)

The edit dissolve between the present and the past is on the two match-cut images of Rocket (from *City of God*), shown on the right. Using him as the central point of the flashback indicates that the narrative is being told from his perspective. These two images also reinforce the colour palette of the past and the present. As the film progresses, the colours move from the gold of the past to the blue of the present.
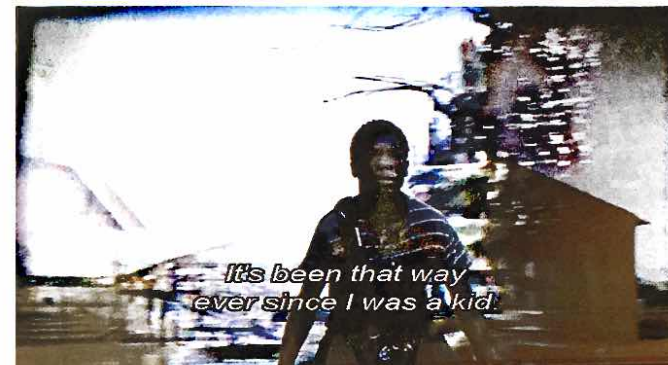
Editing:
Speed of editing

The length of each **shot**, scene and sequence will set the tone of what is happening on screen. A shot may last for a few seconds, minutes or the entire film.

A sense of urgency can be manufactured by increasing the frequency of the editing, seeing the action from various shots/angles – perhaps every few frames/seconds in a fight scene, for instance. For a more relaxed mood, scenes can last longer with less shot changes, such as a rom-com. If something is meant to be relaxing, then moving around it slowly, through occasional edits, gives the impression of wandering around in no hurry. Cutting rapidly backwards and forwards between different angles, from close-ups to long shots, all in rapid succession, reminds us of dashing about, with no time to lose or adds to the chaos of a situation.

Scenes at the beginning of a film, where we are getting to know the characters and the story is unfolding, will usually have a slower pace of editing. As the film progresses, this pace may quicken as we cut between storylines and characters.

Shot length

The average number of **shots** in a classic Hollywood film from the 1940s or 1950s would have been 150 edits. Nowadays, there are about 1,300 individual shots in an average movie. An action movie may have more than twice as many, for instance *Mad Max: Fury Road* (Miller, 2015) has roughly 3,000 shots.

One of the reasons for this change is the move to editing digitally using a non-linear editing system, making it much easier for shorter shot lengths. Before their widespread use in the 1990s, film editors would literally cut and paste the film negative – not the original shooting negative but a cutting copy.

Historically, each physical frame would have to be examined from the multiple re-takes, angles and shot types. Remember there are 24 frames for each second of screen time. That's a lot of frames.

This is why you will find that, in general, films edited on film would have less edits/longer shots. The shot length creates the pace of the film. Compare an Alfred Hitchcock film (average shot length 9.1 seconds) with a Christopher Nolan film (3.1 seconds).

Inception (Nolan, 2010)

Case study: Speed of editing

Compare these three sequences.

We Need to Talk About Kevin
(Ramsay, 2011: 01:43:00–01:46:30)

The measured pace of the editing during the emotional conversation between Eva and Kevin is deliberately slow to mirror its importance and the length of time we have waited for this reunion. The scene builds slowly, through a series of **shot/reverse shots** culminating in a fleeting moment of intimacy as the two awkwardly embrace. This embrace is made all the more poignant because of the slow build-up to it. The editing mirrors the stillness of the cinematography, and the sparseness of the setting, costumes and make-up.

City of God (Meirelles, 2002; 00:00:14–00:04:42)

The first 2'40" comprises of fast edited **cross-cutting** between food being prepared, musicians and an escaped chicken being chased by a gang of youths with guns, led by Lil Ze. There are alternating short bursts of images comprising different **shot types** (ECU, CU, MCU and MS), and **angles** (high, low and eye-level from both humans and chickens) that are cut to the vibrant rhythms of Brazilian music. This creates a heady atmosphere of life in the favelas – a place full of energy and extremes. Out of all this confusion, the pace slows and, in the longest shot in this sequence (15"), we follow Rocket and his friend.

The scene then returns to the fast-paced cross-cutting, now between the chase and the boys, which suggests that danger and violence are just around the corner. As the two stories collide, to illustrate Lil Ze's dominance, he is seen in **slow-motion**, literally taking up more screen time. The pace of the editing slows as the youths gather at one end of the road and the police at the other, with Rocket and the chicken caught in the middle. Rocket's narration begins, the camera circles around Rocket, and we **dissolve** to a **match-cut** image of Rocket as a child (see screenshots on page 33).

Shaun of the Dead
(Wright, 2004; 00:04:04–00:04:23)

We see Shaun get up from the sofa and walk towards the door. It then cuts to a series of six **quick-cuts** (combined with **frantic-zoom ECU** cinematography) as he gets ready for work. This 4" sequence is followed by a 10" shot of him adjusting his tie and talking to Pete. This is followed by another sequence of six quick-cuts of breakfast preparation. These extreme quick-cuts are used for comic effect and form part of Edgar Wright's **aesthetic**.

Editing:
Experimental editing techniques

Montage editing and the Kuleshov effect

The **Kuleshov effect** is a film editing process, which has evolved into **montage editing**. The technique was named after the Soviet filmmaker Lev Kuleshov, who made short films in the 1910s and 1920s. He proposed that by putting or juxtaposing two images sequentially, the viewer would gain a greater understanding of the filmmaker's intent than by a single shot.

His research about how viewers process images and make meaning gained from the images presented has been widely studied by psychologists. The research had a profound influence on Soviet film directors Sergei Eisenstein and Dziga Vertov, who, at the time, were moving away from conventional narrative editing towards a new national cinema founded on the principles of **montage editing**. They used montage editing to juxtapose images to create further meaning.

Sergei Eisenstein was at the forefront of a group of **Soviet filmmakers** who took Kuleshov's research on film editing and employed it within a narrative feature film. His most widely studied montage sequence is the **'The Odessa Steps'** from *The Battleship Potemkin* (Eisenstein, 1925). In this, the continual barrage of images cut quickly together brings about emotions of confusion and helplessness. The images presented sequentially are then paired: high angles with low; close-ups with long shots; small with large. Soon it becomes unclear if we are at the top of the steps or the bottom, as we witness the helplessness and disarray of the people contrasted with the power and uniformity of the army. You can read more about Eisenstein in Part 1, Section 3 on his film *Strike* (1925).

Dziga Vertov was a documentary filmmaker who had been making films since 1919. *Man with a Movie Camera* (Vertov, 1929) has approximately **1,775 separate shots** – a new shot every few seconds. The film can be considered as part of a silent film genre known as **city symphonies**, in which a city is documented and celebrated through the poetic use of images and score. *Études sur Paris* (Sauvage, 1928) and *Berlin: Symphony of a Great City* (Ruttman, 1927) were both experimental in film form, pushing the boundaries of filmmaking, narrative and editing.

Unlike continuity editing, montage editing draws attention to the editing process by the frequent cutting between images, which can comprise of different shot types and transitions. The technique of montage (although perhaps not the political ideology) has been incorporated into mainstream cinema and is usually used to demonstrate the passing of time.

A montage sequence is used to great effect in *This is England*, where, to provide context for the film's period setting, the film opens with a montage of news footage of significant historical, political and cultural moments from the 1980s. The juxtaposition of Roland Rat and Margaret Thatcher is humorous, but also points to the extremes of the era, and perhaps even implies criticism of Margaret Thatcher.
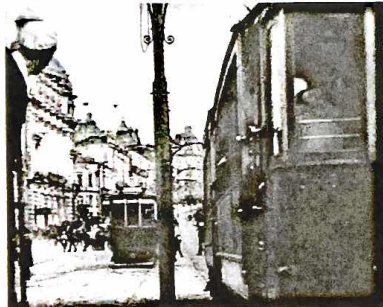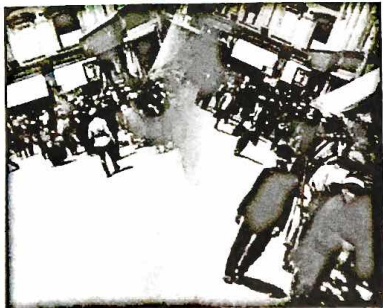
Man with a Movie Camera (Vertov, 1929)

This is England (Meadows, 2006)

Continuous take

The continuous take is the antitheses of editing, but some filmmakers have deliberately not edited a scene, sequence or even an entire film.

The opening sequence of *A Touch of Evil* (Welles, 1958) is an elaborate 3' 30" take. *Rope* (Hitchcock, 1948) was conceived as one long continuous take, but as they were working on celluloid there were limits to the shot length, forcing Hitchcock to film ten shots of lengths varying from 4'37" to 10'06", with the edits cleverly disguised.

With the arrival of digital filming, directors were no longer tied to the limits of a film camera magazine.

The single continuous take reached its zenith with *Timecode* (Figgis, 2000): a satire on Hollywood in which four digital cameras recorded, in real time, simultaneous characters and storylines in one long 93' take. Locations were all planned ahead of time, and actors were aware of where they had to be by a certain point, but what they did on the way and conversations were largely improvised around a loose storyline. As there was to be an earthquake, all four camera operators and the actors had to 'act' the earthquake at the exact same time. The entire film was filmed 15 times on consecutive days. There are no edits between each day's takes.

There are points where two characters meet, and the action is shot from two different cameras/angles (see bottom two images on the right).

All four takes are shown simultaneously on screen. The 'editing' comes in the audio mix being raised and lowered to direct your attention from quadrant to quadrant.

Russian Ark (Sokurov, 2002) is a single 90' steadicam shot through the Hermitage Museum in Saint Petersberg. Following an unnamed narrator encountering real and fictitious people from 300 years of Russian history, 33 rooms in the museum are visited, and over 2,000 actors and three orchestras are seen. *Victoria* (Schipper, 2015) is a 260' German crime thriller shot in a single take on the streets of Berlin.
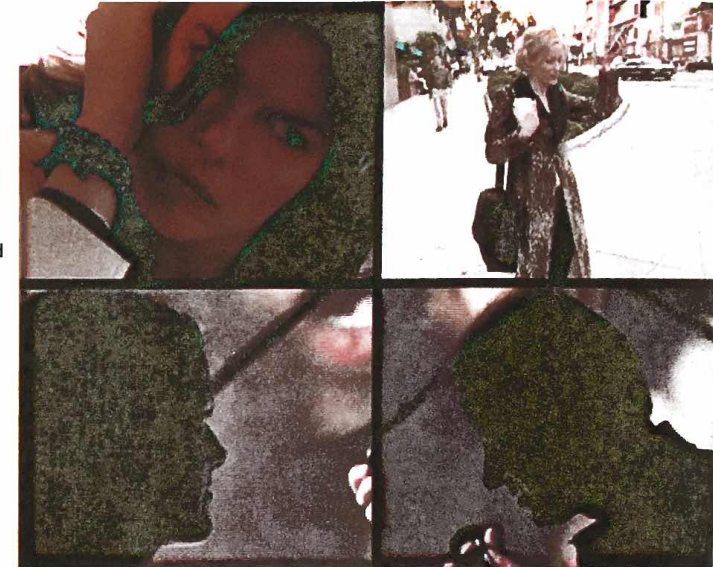
Timecode (Figgis, 2000)

Victoria (Schipper, 2015)