The foundation of film art is editing.

—V. I. PUDOVKIN, FILMMAKER AND FILM CRITIC
Continuity

In the earliest years of cinema, the late 1890s, movies were brief, consisting of short events photographed in long shots in a single take. The duration of the shot and the event were equal. Soon, filmmakers began to tell stories—simple ones, it’s true, but requiring more than a single shot. Scholars have traced the development of narrative to filmmakers in France, Britain, and the United States.

By the early twentieth century, filmmakers had already devised a functional style of editing we now call cutting to continuity. This type of cutting is a technique used in most fiction films even today, if only for exposition scenes. Essentially, this style of editing is a kind of shorthand, consisting of time-honored conventions. Continuity cutting tries to preserve the fluidity of an event without literally showing all of it.

For example, a continuous shot of a woman leaving work and going home might take forty-five minutes. Cutting to continuity condenses the action into a few brief shots, each of which leads by association to the next: (1) She enters a corridor as she closes the door to her office. (2) She leaves the office building. (3) She enters and starts her car. (4) She drives her car along a highway. (5) Her car turns into her driveway at home. The entire forty-five-minute action might take ten seconds of screen time, yet nothing essential is left out. It’s an unobtrusive condensation.

To keep the action logical and continuous, there must be no confusing breaks in an edited sequence of this sort. Often, all the movement is carried out in the same direction on the screen to avoid confusion. For example, if the woman moves from right to left in one shot and her movements are from left to right in the other shots, we might think that she is returning to her office. Cause–effect relationships must be clearly set forth. If the woman slams on her brakes, the director is generally obliged to offer us a shot of what prompted the driver to stop so suddenly.

So far, we’ve been concerned with cinematic communication as it relates to the single shot, the basic unit of construction in movies. Except for traveling shots and lengthy takes, however, shots in film tend to acquire meaning when they are juxtaposed with other shots and structured into an edited sequence. Physically, editing is simply joining one strip of film (shot) with another. On the most mechanical level, editing eliminates unnecessary time and space. Through the association of ideas, editing connects one shot with another, one scene with another, and so on. Simple as this may now seem, the convention of editing represents what critic Terry Ramsaye referred to as the “syntax” of cinema, its grammatical language. Like linguistic syntax, the syntax of editing must be learned. We don’t possess it innately.
People often refer to a film as “slow” or “fast-moving.” Generally, the pace of a movie is determined by the subject matter—a thriller is likely to be edited at a faster pace than a subtle psychological study—but sometimes the editing pace is determined by a director’s temperament. For example, both *Zodiac* and *Mission Impossible III* are thrillers, but Fincher’s historically based case study of a San Francisco serial killer and the people trying to catch him moves at a slow, deliberate pace, like most of Fincher’s other works (*Alien³, The Fight Club, The Curious Case of Benjamin Button*). On the other hand, *Mission Impossible III*, like many action films, moves at an almost frantic pace. Although the average Hollywood film contains about 1,000 shots, action thrillers tend to average over 2,000. A typical film’s shots average about 5–8 seconds in length; but the shots of thrillers average about 2–4 seconds. Many directors believe that contemporary audiences—debauched by video games, TV remote controls, and a steady diet of action films—won’t sit still for a movie that doesn’t race to an explosive climax of split-second shots.
How a scene is edited can be very subjective, depending on who's doing the cutting and what the editor wants to emphasize. In this domestic family quarrel, for example, the scene is slanted toward the wronged wife (Keiko Kishi, lower right) and her bullying husband (Teinosuke Sachiko, center left). Her sisters and brother-in-law observe from the rear of the room. But another editor could focus on any of the other four characters, giving them more prominence in the sequence by cutting to their reactions more often, thus conveying the scene primarily from that character’s perspective. In short, six different stories could be told, depending on how the sequence is cut together, and who gets the most shots.  

(R5/S8)
The continuity of actual space and time is fragmented as smoothly as possible in this type of editing. Unless the audience has a clear sense of a continuous action, an editing transition can be disorienting. Hence the term *jump cut*, which means an editing transition that's confusing in terms of space and time. To make their transitions smooth, filmmakers generally use *establishing shots* at the beginning of their stories or at the beginning of any new scene within the narrative.

Once the location is established, filmmakers then can cut to closer shots of the action. If the events require a considerable number of cuts, the filmmaker might cut back to a *reestablishing shot*—a return to the opening long shot. In this way, the viewer is reminded of the spatial context of the closer shots. “Between” these various shots, time and space can be expanded or contracted with considerable subtlety.

By 1908, when the American D. W. Griffith entered the field of filmmaking, movies had already learned how to tell stories thanks to the technique of cutting to continuity. But the stories were simple and crude compared to those in more sophisticated narrative mediums like literature and drama. Nonetheless, movie storytellers already knew that by breaking up an action into different shots, the event can be contracted or expanded, depending on the number of shots. In other words, the shot, not the scene, was the basic unit of film construction.

Movies before Griffith were usually photographed in stationary long shot—roughly the position of a close observer in the live theater. Because film time doesn’t depend on the duration of the literal event, filmmakers of this era introduced a more subjective time, one that’s determined by the duration of the shots (and the elapsed time implied between them), not by the actual occurrence.

### D. W. Griffith and Classical Cutting

The basic elements of editing syntax were already in place when Griffith entered the field, but it was he more than any other individual who molded these elements into a language of power and subtlety. Film scholars have called this language *classical cutting*. Griffith
The Lumière brothers might be regarded as the godfathers of the documentary movement. Their brief actualités (as they called them) are primitive documentaries shot for the most part in single takes. These early newsreels often contained several different sequences, but rarely is there much cutting within a sequence—hence the term sequence shot (that is, a complex action photographed in a continuous take, without cuts). Audiences of this era were so astonished by the novelty of a moving picture that this alone was enough to hold their attention. See also Bill Nichols, Representing Reality: Issues and Concepts in Documentary (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991).
has been called the Father of Film because he consolidated and expanded many of the techniques invented by his predecessors and was the first to go beyond gimmickry into the realm of art. By 1915, the year of his famous epic *The Birth of a Nation*, classical cutting was already an editing style of great sophistication and expressiveness. Griffith had seized on the principle of the association of ideas in the concept of editing and expanded it in a variety of ways.

Classical cutting involves editing for dramatic intensity and emotional emphasis rather than for purely physical reasons. Through the use of the close-up within the scene, Griffith managed to achieve a dramatic impact that was unprecedented. Close-ups had been used earlier, but Griffith was the first to use them for psychological rather than physical reasons alone. Audiences were now permitted to see the smallest details of an actor’s face. No longer were performers required to flail their arms and tear their hair. The slightest arch of an eyebrow could convey a multitude of subtleties.

By splitting the action into a series of fragmentary shots, Griffith achieved not only a greater sense of detail, but a far greater degree of control over his audience’s reactions. In carefully selecting and juxtaposing long, medium, and close shots, he constantly shifted the spectator’s point of view within a scene—expanding here, excluding there, emphasizing, consolidating, connecting, contrasting, paralleling, and so on. The possibilities were far ranging. The space and time continuum of the real scene was radically expanded.

**4–5 The Birth of a Nation (U.S.A., 1915), directed by D. W. Griffith.**

Griffith’s greatest gift to the cinema was classical cutting—a style of editing that still characterizes most of the fiction films around the world. Classical cutting allows filmmakers to inflect their narratives, to add nuances and emphasis. It also subjectivizes time. For example, in this famous last-minute rescue finale, Griffith cross-cuts to four different groups. Despite the sense of speed suggested by the brevity of the shots, the sequence actually expands time. Griffith used 255 separate shots for about twenty minutes of screen time. *(Museum of Modern Art)*
altered. It was replaced by a subjective continuity—the association of ideas implicit in the connected shots.

In its most refined form, classical cutting presents a series of psychologically connected shots—shots that aren’t necessarily separated by real time and space (4–14). For example, if four characters are seated in a room, a director might cut from one speaker to a second with a dialogue exchange, then cut to a reaction shot of one of the listeners, then to a two-shot of the original speakers, and finally to a close-up of the fourth person. The sequence of shots represents a kind of psychological cause-effect pattern. In other words, the breakup of shots is justified on the basis of dramatic rather than literal necessity. The scene could be photographed just as functionally in a single shot, with the camera at long-shot range. This type of setup is known as a master shot or a sequence shot. Classical cutting is more nuanced and more intrusive. It breaks down the unity of space, analyzes its components, and refocuses our attention to a series of details. The action is mental and emotional rather than literal.

During the golden years of the American studio system—roughly the 1930s and 1940s—directors were often urged (or forced) to adopt the master-shot technique of shooting. This method involved shooting an entire scene in long shot without cuts. This
take contained all the dramatic variables and hence served as the basic or “master” shot for the scene. The action was then repeated a number of times, with the camera photographing medium shots and close-ups of the principals in the scene. When all this footage was gathered together, the editor had a number of choices in constructing a story continuity. Often, disagreements arose over the proper sequence of shots. Usually, the studio director was permitted a first cut—that is, the sequence of shots representing his or her interpretation of the materials. Under this system, the studios usually had the right to a final cut. Many directors disliked master-shot techniques precisely because, with so much footage available, a meddling producer could construct a radically different continuity.

Master shots are still used by many directors. Without a master, editors often complain of inadequate footage—that the available shots won’t cut smoothly. In complex battle scenes, most directors are likely to shoot many cover shots—that is, general shots that can be used to reestablish a sequence if the other shots won’t cut. In The Birth of a Nation, Griffith used multiple cameras to photograph many of the battle scenes, a technique also used by Akira Kurosawa in some sequences of The Seven Samurai.

Griffith and other classical filmmakers developed a variety of editing conventions that they thought made the cutting “invisible,” or at least didn’t call attention to itself. One of these techniques is the eyeline match. We see character A look off frame left. Cut to a shot—from his point of view—of character B. We assume B is to A’s left. Cause–effect.

Another convention of classical cutting is matching action. Character A is seated but begins to rise. Cut to another shot of the character concluding the rising action and then...
The idea is to keep the action fluid, to mask the cut with a smooth linkage that’s not noticed because the motion of the character takes precedence. The continuity of the movement conceals the suture.

The so-called 180° rule is still observed by filmmakers, although even during the big-studio era there was nothing sacred about it. (For example, John Ford loved violating the 180° rule. He loved violating almost any rule.) This convention involves **mise en scène** as well as editing. The purpose is to stabilize the space of the playing area so the spectator isn’t confused or disoriented. An imaginary “axis of action” line is drawn through the middle of a scene, viewed from the **bird’s-eye** angle (4–9a). Character A is on the left; character B is on the right. If the director wanted a two-shot, he or she would use camera 1. If we then go to a close-up of A (camera 2), the camera must stay on the same side of the 180° line to keep the same background—a continuity aid for the spectator. Similarly, a close-up of character B (camera 3) would be shot on the same side of the axis of action.

Classical cutting involves editing for dramatic emphasis, to highlight details that might otherwise be overlooked. In Huston’s fight scene, for example, the entire boxing match could have been presented in a single setup (a). Such a presentation would probably strike us as underwhelming. Instead, Huston breaks up his shots according to the psychological actions and reactions within the fighter protagonist (Stacy Keach) (b), his manager (Nicholas Colosanto) (c), and two friends in the auditorium (Candy Clark and Jeff Bridges) (d).
Movies are rarely edited at the same pace throughout. The cutting rhythms of a given scene are determined by the scene’s tone. Pictured here, the sixtyish former boxer is in a contemplative mood, and the editing is appropriately languid. The boxing scenes are edited at a much more frenetic pace, reflecting their speed and violence. (Columbia Pictures)
One of the most elementary editing practices is the **shot/reverse shot** technique. This pattern of cutting is generally used when a scene is broken down into cause/effect. The shot from *The Family Stone*, for example, is clearly a reaction to an action that’s taking place off frame, though in the same space. Even a conversation between two people can use the shot/reverse shot technique. If the director wishes to establish a harmonious rapport between the characters, they are most likely to appear in a unified two-shot, sharing the same space. But if the characters are in conflict, or there is a high degree of discomfort between them, a director is more likely to cut from one character to the other, to emphasize their separateness. (Twentieth Century Fox Film Corporation)

---

Capra was a master of classical editing. His cutting style was fast, light, seamless. But he never displayed his editing virtuosity for its own sake. Like every other technique, editing is subordinated to the needs of the characters in action—the cardinal commandment of classical cutting. In this and other scenes, Capra included a “reactive character” who guides the viewer’s response to the action. This character represents a kind of norm, the way an average person would respond to a given situation. In this scene, for example, Capra’s charming fantasy takes a whimsical turn. The forlorn hero (Stewart) listens to his guardian angel (Henry Travers, left) explain why he isn’t a very distinguished angel (he has yet to earn his wings). The reactive character is a casual bystander (Tom Fadden, center) who happens to overhear and is totally spooked by their conversation. Capra is able to punctuate the comedy of the scene by cutting to this character’s response whenever the angel says something weird. (RKO)
In reverse angle shot exchanges—common for dialogue sequences—the director takes care to fix the placement of the characters from shot to shot. If character A is on the left and character B is on the right in the first shot, they must remain that way in the reverse angle taken from over the shoulder of character B. Usually the reverse angle is not literally 180° opposite, but we agree to accept it as such.

Even today, filmmakers rarely take the camera behind the imaginary axis line, unless their deliberate intention is to confuse the spectator. During fight scenes and other types of chaotic clashes, the filmmaker often wants the spectator to feel threatened, disoriented, anxious. This can be accomplished by deliberately violating the 180° rule.

Griffith also perfected the conventions of the chase—still very much with us. Many of his movies ended with a chase and last-minute rescue sequence. Most of them feature parallel editing—the switching of shots of one scene with another at a different location. By cross-cutting back and forth between the two (or three or four) scenes, Griffith conveyed the idea of simultaneous time. For example, near the end of The Birth of a Nation, Griffith cross-cuts between four groups. In juxtaposing shots from these separate scenes, he manages to intensify the suspense by reducing the duration of the shots as the sequence reaches its climax. The sequence itself lasts twenty minutes of film time, but the psychological effect of the cross-cutting (the shots average about five seconds each) suggests speed and tension. Generally speaking, the greater the number of cuts within a scene, the greater its sense of speed. To avoid the risk of monotony during this sequence, Griffith changed his setups many times. There are extreme long, long, medium, and close shots; varied angles; lighting contrasts; even a moving camera (it was mounted on a truck).

If the continuity of a sequence is reasonably logical, the fragmentation of space presents no great difficulties. But the problem of time is more complex. Its treatment in film is more subjective than the treatment of space. Movies can compress years into two hours of projection time. They can also stretch a split second into many minutes. Most films condense time. There are only a handful that attempt to make screen time conform to real time: Agnès Varda’s Cleo from Five to Seven and Fred Zinnemann’s High Noon (4–24) are perhaps the best-known examples. Both deal with about 90 minutes of time—also the approximate length of the films. Even these movies cheat by compressing time in the expository opening sequences and expanding it in the climactic scenes. In actual practice, time exists in a kind of limbo: As long as the audience is absorbed by the screen action, time is what the film says it is. The problem, then, is to absorb the viewer.

On the most mechanical level, screen time is determined by the physical length of the filmstrip containing the shot. This length is governed generally by the complexity of the image subject matter. Usually, longer shots are more densely saturated with visual information than close-ups and need to be held longer on the screen. Raymond Spottiswoode, an early film theorist, claimed that a cut must be made at the peak of the “content curve”—that is, the point in a shot at which the audience has been able to assimilate most of its information. Cutting after the peak of the content curve produces boredom and a sense of dragging time. Cutting before the peak doesn’t give the audience enough time to assimilate the visual action. An image with a complex mise en scène requires more time to assimilate than a simple one. Once an image has been established, however, a return to it during the sequence can be considerably shorter, because it works as a reminder.

But the sensitive treatment of time in editing is largely an instinctive matter that defies mechanical rules (4–1a). Most great directors have edited their own films, or at least worked in close collaboration with their editors, so crucial is this art to the success of films. The best-edited sequences are determined by mood as well as subject matter. Griffith, for example, generally edited love scenes in long lyrical takes, with relatively few setups. His chase and battle scenes were composed of brief shots, jammed together. Paradoxically, the love scenes actually compress real time, whereas the rapidly cut sequences elongate it.
Why do some movie directors cut while others avoid cutting by including all the variables in a single shot? Still other filmmakers prefer to move their camera along with the action rather than cut between separate shots. The differences may seem unimportant to the average viewer, but serious film artists realize that each of these three techniques suggests different psychological undertones—undertones that even average viewers respond to, though they might not be able to explain their response analytically.

The scene from *Pulp Fiction* takes place in a confined restaurant booth. Logically, Tarantino could have shot the scene with a single setup, with both characters in profile facing each other. But the dramatic context demands a different strategy. Travolta plays a junkie/hit man whose gangster boss has asked him to take his wife to dinner while the boss is out of town. Wary of her flaky, unpredictable behavior, and fully conscious that a careless slip-up could cost him his life, the Travolta character “keeps his distance” from her—an aloofness that intrigues her. By keeping the two in separate space cubicles with a traditional shot/counter-shot technique, Tarantino stresses their psychological apartness. The editing keeps a distance between them.
The shot from *Gladiator* is more unified in its presentation, with the sympathetic hero (Crowe) trapped in the same arena with a hungry tiger and a hostile giant who’s determined to destroy him. In the movie itself, Ridley Scott cuts to all three of these dramatic variables to stretch out the suspense, but the greatest danger is conveyed in shots like this, where all three must fight to the finish in a relatively confined space.

Scorsese, who is a superlative editor, is also a master of the moving camera, and he often prefers to move with the action rather than break it down into a series of separate shots. Why? Mostly because the moving camera is more fluid, more lyrical. (It’s also more expensive and time consuming.) In this wedding dance scene from *GoodFellas*, for example, Scorsese conveys the couple’s euphoria by swirling the camera along with the dancers. These spontaneous eruptions destabilize the visual materials, infusing the action with a surge of energy, almost a kinetic high. The camera seems enraptured.
Possession (U.S.A., 2002), with Gwyneth Paltrow and Aaron Eckhart (a), and Jennifer Ehle and Jeremy Northam (b), directed by Neil LaBute.

Among Griffith’s many achievements was the introduction of thematic editing—connecting shots not to preserve the continuity of time and place, but to connect different time periods and locations on the basis of their thematic relationship. This is a technique that is still very much a part of modern filmmakers’ arsenal. In Possession, for example, two time periods—the modern era and the Victorian period—are intercut throughout the movie. An American literary academic (Eckhart) and a British scholar (Gwyneth Paltrow) attempt to unravel the mystery of the love affair between a famous nineteenth-century romantic poet (Northam) and his secret paramour (Ehle). LaBute intercuts the two stories to draw parallels—sometimes ironic—between the two couples and the two time periods. The movie is based on a celebrated British novel by A. S. Byatt. (Focus Features)

The Night of the Shooting Stars (Italy, 1982), directed by Paolo and Vittorio Taviani.

Through editing, filmmakers can interrupt the present with fantasy inserts that represent what a character is thinking or imagining. For example, this movie deals with the lives of some Italian villagers during the final days of Fascist rule in World War II, when the American army was about to liberate their community. The tale is told by a woman who was only six at the time. In this scene we see the death of a Fascist thug not as it occurs in reality (he is shot by anti-Fascist Partisans), but as it appears in the imagination of a 6-year-old: The Partisans are armor-clad gladiators who hurl their spears of wrath at the Fascist, impaling him like a contemptible swine. (United Artists)
There are no fixed rules concerning rhythm in films. Some editors cut according to musical rhythms (see 5-12). The march of soldiers, for example, could be edited to the beat of a military tune, as can be seen in several marching sequences in King Vidor’s *The Big Parade*. This technique is also common with American avant-garde filmmakers, who feature rock music soundtracks or cut according to a mathematical or structural formula. In some cases, a director will cut before the peak of the content curve, especially in highly suspenseful sequences. In a number of movies, Hitchcock teases the audience by not providing enough time to assimilate all the meanings of a shot. Violent scenes are conventionally cut in a highly fragmented manner. On the other hand, Antonioni usually cut long after the content curve peaked. In *La Notte*, for example, the rhythm is languorous and even monotonous: The director attempts to create a sense of weariness in the audience, paralleling that of the characters. Antonioni’s characters are usually tired people—in every sense of the term (see 4–13a).

Tact is another editing principle that’s difficult to generalize about, because it too depends on context. No one likes to have the obvious pointed out to us, whether in real life or while watching a movie. Like personal tact, directorial tact is a matter of restraint, taste, and respect for the intelligence of others. Hack directors often present us with emotionally gratuitous shots, falling over themselves to make sure we haven’t missed the point. Griffith’s most radical experiments in editing are found in his 1916 epic, *Intolerance*, the first fiction film to explore the idea of thematic montage. Both the film and the technique exerted an enormous influence on movie directors of the 1920s, especially in the Soviet Union. Thematic montage stresses the association of ideas, irrespective of the continuity of time and space.

*Intolerance* is unified by the themes of bigotry and persecution. Rather than tell one story, Griffith intercut four. One takes place in ancient Babylon. The second deals with the crucifixion of Jesus. The third concerns the massacre of the Huguenots by the Catholic royalists in sixteenth-century France. The last story takes place in America in 1916 and deals with a battle between labor and management.

The four stories are developed not separately but in parallel fashion. Scenes of one time period are intercut with scenes of another. At the conclusion of the movie, Griffith features suspenseful chase sequences in the first and last stories, a brutal scene of slaughter in the French story, and a slow, tragic climax in the killing of Jesus. The concluding sequence contains literally hundreds of shots, juxtaposing images that are separated by thousands of years and by as many miles. All these different time periods and locations are unified by the central theme of intolerance. The continuity is no longer physical, or even psychological, but conceptual—that is, thematic.

*Intolerance* was not a commercial success, but its influence was immense. The filmmakers of the Soviet Union were dazzled by Griffith’s movie and based their own theories of montage on his practices in this film. A great many directors have profitied from Griffith’s experiments in the subjective treatment of time. In *The Pawnbroker*, for example, Sidney Lumet exploits the art of editing to produce a series of parallels that are thematically rather than chronologically related. He uses a kind of subliminal editing, in which some shots are held on the screen for only a fraction of a second. The central character is a middle-aged Jew who survived a Nazi concentration camp twenty-five years earlier. All his loved ones were killed there. He tries to repress the memories of these earlier experiences, but they force their way into his consciousness. Lumet suggests this psychological process by intercutting a few frames of the memory shots during a scene that is occurring in the present. A present-tense event detonates the protagonist’s memory of something similar from his past. As past contends with present, the flickering memory shots endure longer, until a flashback sequence eventually becomes dominant, and the present is momentarily suspended. With only a few exceptions, however, it was not until the 1960s that such unorthodox editing practices became widespread.
4–13a & b  **L’Avventura (Italy, 1960)**, with Monica Vitti, directed by Michelangelo Antonioni.

Psychological films often use movements in and out of the depth of an image, especially to create a sense of tediousness and exhaustion. Shots of this sort require **anticipatory setups** that reinforce these qualities, for we see the destination of a character’s movement long before it’s completed. Here, the heroine’s search for her lover in the corridors of a hotel suggests the futility of her love affair. The endless succession of doors, fixtures, and hallways implies, among other things, the repetition of the frustration she is now experiencing. Much of the meaning of shots such as these lies in their duration: Space is used to suggest time. Needless to say, Antonioni’s movies are among the slowest paced in the history of cinema: Long after the viewer has had time to absorb the visual information of a shot, it continues on the screen. When this film was originally shown at the Cannes Film Festival, an audience of hostile critics kept shouting “Cut! Cut!” at the screen. The shots were so lengthy and the pace so slow that viewers assumed the director was inept at editing. But like many of Antonioni’s works, *L’Avventura* is about spiritual erosion, and the movie’s slow rhythm is organically related to this theme.  *(Janus Films)*
Filmmakers can interrupt the present with shots not only of the past but of the future as well. In Sydney Pollack’s They Shoot Horses, Don’t They?, short flash-forwards of a courtroom scene are interspersed throughout the present-tense story. The flash-forwards suggest predestination: Like the dance contest of the story proper, the future is rigged, and personal effort is equated with self-deception.

Griffith also restructured time and place through the use of fantasy inserts. In Intolerance, for example, a young woman on the verge of murdering her unfaithful boyfriend imagines a scene where she is apprehended by the police. Flashbacks, flash-forwards, and cutaways to fantasies allow filmmakers to develop ideas thematically rather than chronologically, freeing them to explore the subjective nature of time and the human mind. The very flexibility of time in movies makes the theme of temporality an ideal subject for the medium.

Like Faulkner, Proust, and other novelists, filmmakers have succeeded in cracking the tyranny of mechanically measured time. One of the most complex instances of the restructuring of time is found in Slumdog Millionaire, directed by Danny Boyle. The film is set in Mumbai, India, where an impoverished youth is a contestant on a TV show called

4-14 The Last Picture Show (U.S.A., 1971), with Cybill Shepherd and Ellen Burstyn, directed by Peter Bogdanovich.

In its subtlest form, classical cutting can break up even a confined action into smaller units of meaning. François Truffaut once observed that movies in which people tell lies require more shots than those in which they tell the truth. For example, if a young daughter tells her mother that she thinks she is in love with a boy, and the mother responds by warning the girl of some of the emotional dangers involved, there’s no reason why the scene shouldn’t be photographed in a single setup with both females in the same frame. Essentially, this is how Bogdanovich presents a similar scene (a). However, if the mother were a lying hypocrite, and the daughter suspected that the older woman might be in love with the boy herself, a director would be forced to break the scene down into five or six shots (b-g) to give viewers emotional information they wouldn’t receive from the characters themselves. (Columbia Pictures)
Editing can shift the action from reality to fantasy in an instant. Often, such shifts are accompanied by a cue—eerie music, for example, or a rippling image that suggests a different level of consciousness. At other times, the shift is undetectable, a deliberate attempt to disorient the viewer. The novelist hero of this movie often intermingles reality with fantasy. In this scene, he is trying to shave while suffering from a colossal hangover. His roommate is practicing his music, making the shaky hero even shakier. In exasperation, he walks over to the roommate and strangles him. A moment later, we see the hero shaving again and the roommate still practicing his music. The strangulation took place only in the hero’s vivid imagination. Because it is presented with no transitional cue, we too confuse reality with fantasy—the theme of the film, and the entry point of the creative process for the writer. (International Spectrafilm Distribution)

A favorite technique used by contemporary filmmakers is to provide multiple narratives rather than a single plotline. In this way, a film artist can tell many stories featuring a wide variety of characters rather than just one story with only a few major characters. But there are also dangers in this technique. For example, many viewers were confused by the complex interweaving of narratives in Syriana. The motives of the characters are often unclear and hard to understand, notwithstanding the excellence of most of the scenes, and many first-rate performances, such as Clooney’s Academy Award-winning role as a conscientious CIA agent who’s being shafted by his own organization. (Warner Bros.)
Even in the heyday of the Hollywood studio system, when the dominance of classical cutting was virtually unchallenged, there were instances when you couldn't interrupt the action with a cut. For example, in this famous dance sequence, Astaire begins to tap dance on the floor of his hotel room and then—without a cut—he taps up the wall, then onto the ceiling, seemingly defying gravity. How was it done? A revolving set and camera were synchronized so that whenever the hotel room slowly began to turn, the camera turned with it as Astaire tapped his way onto the new “floor” unobtrusively in one continuous motion. Had director Donen cut to separate shots, the sequence would have lost much of its magical whimsy.  (MGM)
Editing is often used to deceive—to conceal rather than reveal. For example, the dance numbers in this film were performed by a double, a professional dancer whose identity is cunningly concealed by the artful lighting and the discreetly distanced camera. These dance shots were intercut with closer shots of Jennifer Beals, wearing the same costume and moving to the same music. With the musical number providing the continuity, these intercut shots create the illusion of a continuous movement, with Beals featured throughout. These editing techniques are also commonly used in such scenes as sword fights, dangerous stunts, and many other activities requiring specialized skills.

“We can save it in the editing” is a common refrain among filmmakers who are dissatisfied with how a scene plays in its uncut form. Jodie Foster, who is a director as well as an actor, has said: “What you can do in the editing room to help a scene is amazing.” A sluggish performance by an actor can be juiced up by quick cutting. “You can definitely help performances by intercutting reaction shots,” Foster has pointed out. “And you can help a film’s structure by moving sequences to another location, or even by dropping scenes that hold up the pacing.”

Of course this very flexibility is what can ruin an otherwise good movie. Many producing organizations, especially in the Hollywood film industry, try to control the final cut of a film, the better to goose up its pacing and cut the product down to a tidy two-hour length. This is why there are so many “director’s cut” versions in DVD and video formats. Such recut versions represent what the director originally wanted to include, not what the big money folks thought would be more commercial. (Sometimes they’re right.)

Jodie Foster, a two-time Academy Award winner as Best Actress, is also a single mother of two. She has managed her career with remarkable intelligence, beginning as a gifted child actor and moving on to be a producer/director with her own production company.
Musicals are often edited in a radically formalist style, without having to observe the cutting conventions of ordinary dramatic movies. The editing of *West Side Story* is very abstract. The music, by Leonard Bernstein, and the dance numbers, choreographed by Jerome Robbins, are edited together for maximum aesthetic impact, rather than to forward the story. Nor are the shots linked by some principle of thematic association. Rather, the shots are juxtaposed primarily for their lyrical and kinetic beauty, somewhat like a music video. *(United Artists)*

Andrew Lloyd Webber’s famous stage musical was directed by the great Harold Prince, the winner of many Broadway Tony Awards. The stage version featured a variety of poetic and thrilling scenes, made possible precisely because of the physical limitations of the stage: Space is often symbolic rather than literal. Schumacher uses many edits in the film version, but the movie is not circumscribed by a single stage space, and hence, the film musical offers us a seamless, fluid staging of the action—like a mesmerizing dream that’s both scary and seductive. *(Warner Bros.)*
Who Wants to Be a Millionaire. The young man is uneducated, but astonishingly, each time he’s asked a question, he gives the correct answer. Many people—including the police—think he’s cheating, that he’s been given the answers in advance. But we learn otherwise. Each time he’s given a question, Boyle flashes back to an important early experience in the boy’s life. The quiz game questions provide the structural spine of the movie, triggering off a revealing flashback that explains why the youth knows the correct answer. It’s a gimmick, but it works.

From its crude beginnings, Griffith expanded the art of editing to include a wide variety of functions: locale changes, time lapses, shot variety, emphasis of psychological and physical details, overviews, symbolic inserts, parallels and contrasts, associations, point-of-view shifts, simultaneity, and repetition of motifs.

Griffith’s method of editing was also more economical. Related shots could be bunched together in the shooting schedule, regardless of their positions (or “time” and “place”) in the finished film. Especially in later years, in the era of high-salaried stars, directors could shoot all the star sequences in a brief period and out of cinematic continuity. Less expensive details (extreme long shots, minor actors, close-ups of objects, etc.) could be shot at a more convenient time. Later, the shots would be arranged in their proper sequence on the editor’s cutting bench.

Soviet Montage and the Formalist Tradition

Griffith was a practical artist, concerned with communicating ideas and emotions in the most effective manner possible. In the 1920s, the Soviet filmmakers expanded his associational principles and established the theoretical premises for thematic editing, or montage as they called it (from the French, monter, to assemble). V. I. Pudovkin wrote the first important theoretical treatises on what he called constructive editing. Most of his statements are explanations of Griffith’s practices, but he differed with the American (whom he praises lavishly) on several points. Griffith’s use of the close-up, Pudovkin claimed, is too limited. It’s used simply as a clarification of the long shot, which carries most of the meaning. The close-up, in effect, is merely an interruption, offering no meanings of its own. Pudovkin insisted that each shot should make a new point. Through the juxtaposition of shots, new meanings can be created. The meanings, then, are in the juxtapositions, not in one shot alone.

Filmmakers in the Soviet Union were strongly influenced by the psychological theories of Pavlov, whose experiments in the association of ideas served as a basis for the editing experiments of Lev Kuleshov, Pudovkin’s mentor. Kuleshov believed that ideas in cinema are created by linking together fragmentary details to produce a unified action. These details can be totally unrelated in real life. For example, he linked together a shot of Moscow’s Red Square with a shot of the American White House, close-ups of two men climbing stairs with another close-up of two hands shaking. Projected as a continuous scene, the linked shots suggest that the two men are in the same place at the same time.

Kuleshov conducted another famous experiment that provided a theoretical foundation for the use of nonprofessional actors in movies. Kuleshov and many of his colleagues believed that traditional acting skills were quite unnecessary in the cinema. First, he shot a close-up of an actor with a neutral expression. He juxtaposed this with a close-up of a bowl of soup. Then he joined the close-up of the actor with a shot of a coffin containing a female corpse. Finally, he linked the actor’s neutral expression with a shot of a little girl playing. When these combinations were shown to audiences, they exclaimed at the
4–19a  **Dead Men Don’t Wear Plaid (U.S.A., 1982),** with Steve Martin and Carl Reiner (bald pate), directed by Reiner.

Editing as Comedy. Reiner’s comic parody of Nazi films and other noir genres of the 1940s is a tour de force of editing. A silly spy plot involving Martin is intercut with footage from such vintage 1940s movies as *Double Indemnity, Suspicion, The Bribe, Out of the Past,* and *Sorry, Wrong Number.* Pudovkin and Kuleshov would have understood perfectly.  

(University City Studios)

4–19b  **Cloverfield (U.S.A., 2008),** with Lizzy Caplan and Michael Stahl-David, directed by Matt Reeves.

Throughout most of this sci-fi horror film, director Reeves demonstrates one of Pudovkin’s principal ideas: Editing can combine actual events with fantasy events by cross-cutting in a shot/reverse shot pattern (a technique also called shot/countershot). These terrified denizens of New York City flee a deadly creature by taking refuge in the city’s subway system. By cutting back and forth between the monster and the people, the director is able to intensify the suspense. Only rarely—generally in the climax—do the two opposing forces appear in the same shot.  

(Paramount Pictures)
actor’s expressiveness in portraying hunger, deep sorrow, and paternal pride. In each case, the meaning was conveyed by juxtaposing two shots, not by one alone. Actors can be used as raw material, as objects juxtaposed with other objects. The emotion is produced not by the actor’s performance, but by associations brought about by the juxtapositions. In a sense, the viewer creates the emotional meanings, once the appropriate objects have been linked together by the filmmaker (see 4–22).

For Kuleshov and Pudovkin, a sequence was not filmed; it was constructed. Using far more close-ups than Griffith, Pudovkin built a scene from many separate shots, all juxtaposed for a unified effect. The environment of the scene is the source of the images. Long shots are rare. Instead, a barrage of close-ups (often of objects) provides the audience with the necessary associations to link together the meaning. These juxtapositions can suggest emotional and psychological states, even abstract ideas.

The Soviet theorists of this generation were criticized on several counts. This technique detracts from a scene’s sense of realism, some critics complained, for the continuity of actual time and place is totally restructured. But Pudovkin and the other Soviet formalists claimed that realism captured in long shot is too near reality: It’s theatrical rather than cinematic. Movies must capture the essence, not merely the surface, of reality, which is filled with irrelevancies. Only by juxtaposing close-ups of objects, textures, symbols, and other selected details can a filmmaker convey expressively the idea underlying the undifferentiated jumble of real life.

4–20 Lifeboat (U.S.A., 1944), with Tallulah Bankhead (center), directed by Alfred Hitchcock.

Hitchcock was one of Pudovkin’s most articulate champions. “Cinema is form,” Hitchcock insisted. “The screen ought to speak its own language, freshly coined, and it can’t do that unless it treats an acted scene as a piece of raw material which must be broken up, taken to bits, before it can be woven into an expressive visual pattern.” He referred to the piecing together of fragmentary shots as “pure cinema,” like individual notes of music that combine to produce a melody. In this movie, he confined himself entirely to nine characters adrift at sea in a small boat. In other words, this photo contains the raw material for every shot in the film. Formalists insist that the artistry lies not in the materials per se, but in the way they are taken apart and reconstructed expressively. (Twentieth Century Fox)
On the other hand, there are times when a jittery editing style is perfectly appropriate to the subject matter. In *The Bourne Supremacy*, for example, Damon's character is suffering from amnesia. Even though he's very proficient with weapons and self-defense skills, he's never sure who his friends are, or, more importantly, who his enemies are. The fluttery editing style is meant to externalize his fragmentary memories, which flash intermittently in his consciousness, thereby intensifying his paranoia, since he's unable to make coherent sense of these fragments. (Universal Pictures)

---

The Bourne Supremacy (U.S.A., 2004), with Matt Damon and Franka Potente, directed by Paul Greengrass.

On the other hand, there are times when a jittery editing style is perfectly appropriate to the subject matter. In *The Bourne Supremacy*, for example, Damon's character is suffering from amnesia. Even though he's very proficient with weapons and self-defense skills, he's never sure who his friends are, or, more importantly, who his enemies are. The fluttery editing style is meant to externalize his fragmentary memories, which flash intermittently in his consciousness, thereby intensifying his paranoia, since he's unable to make coherent sense of these fragments. (Universal Pictures)
Some critics also believe that this manipulative style of editing guides the spectator too much—the choices are already made. The audience must sit back passively and accept the inevitable linking of associations presented on the screen. Political considerations are involved here, for the Soviets tended to link film with propaganda. Propaganda, no matter how artistic, doesn’t usually involve free and balanced evaluations.

Like many Soviet formalists, Sergei Eisenstein was interested in exploring general principles that could be applied to a variety of apparently different forms of creative activity. He believed that these artistic principles were organically related to the basic nature of all human activity and, ultimately, to the nature of the universe itself. Like the ancient Greek philosopher Heraclitus, Eisenstein believed that the essence of existence is constant change. He believed that nature’s eternal fluctuation is dialectical—the result of the conflict and synthesis of opposites. What appears to be stationary or unified in nature is only temporary, for all phenomena are in various states of becoming. Only energy is permanent, and energy is constantly in a state of transition to other forms. Every opposite contains the seed of its own destruction in time, Eisenstein believed, and this conflict of opposites is the mother of motion and change.

The function of all artists is to capture this dynamic collision of opposites, to incorporate dialectical conflicts not only in the subject matter of art but in its techniques and forms as well. Conflict is universal in all the arts, according to Eisenstein, and therefore all art aspires to motion. Potentially, at least, the cinema is the most comprehensive of the arts because it can incorporate the visual conflicts of painting and photography, the kinetic conflicts of dance, the tonal conflicts of music, the verbal conflicts of language, and the character and action conflicts of fiction and drama.

Eisenstein placed special emphasis on the art of editing. Like Kuleshov and Pudovkin, he believed that montage was the foundation of film art. He agreed with them that each shot of a sequence ought to be incomplete, contributory rather than self-contained. However, Eisenstein criticized the concept of linked shots for being mechanical and inorganic. He believed that editing ought to be dialectical: The conflict of two shots (thesis and antithesis) produces a wholly new idea (synthesis). Thus, in film terms, the conflict between shot A and shot B is not AB (Kuleshov and Pudovkin), but a qualitatively new factor—C (Eisenstein). Transitions between shots should not be smooth, as Pudovkin suggested, but sharp, jolting, even violent. For Eisenstein, editing produces harsh collisions, not subtle linkages. A smooth transition, he claimed, was an opportunity lost.

Editing for Eisenstein was an almost mystical process. He likened it to the growth of organic cells. If each shot represents a developing cell, the cinematic cut is like the rupturing of the cell when it splits into two. Editing is done at the point that a shot “bursts”—that is, when its tensions have reached their maximum expansion. The rhythm of editing in a movie should be like the explosions of an internal combustion engine, Eisenstein claimed. A master of dynamic rhythms, his films are almost mesmerizing in this respect: Shots of contrasting volumes, durations, shapes, designs, and lighting intensities collide against each other like objects in a torrential river plunging toward their inevitable destination.

The differences between Pudovkin and Eisenstein may seem academic. In actual practice, however, the two approaches produced sharply contrasting results. Pudovkin’s movies are essentially in the classical mold. The shots tend to be additive and are directed toward an overall emotional effect, which is guided by the story. In Eisenstein’s movies, the jolting images represent a series of essentially intellectual thrusts and parries, directed toward an ideological argument. The directors’ narrative structures also differed. Pudovkin’s stories didn’t differ much from the kind Griffith used. On the other hand, Eisenstein’s stories were much more loosely structured, usually a series of documentary-like episodes used as convenient vehicles for exploring ideas.

Hitchcock’s thriller centers on a photographic journalist (James Stewart, 4–22b) who is confined to his apartment because of a broken leg. Out of boredom, he begins to observe the lives of his neighbors, who live in the apartment building just behind his own. His high-society girlfriend (Grace Kelly, 4–22a) wants to get married and sees no reason why marriage should interfere with his work. But he puts her off, filling in his idle hours by speculating on the various problems of his neighbors. Each neighbor’s window symbolizes a fragment of Stewart’s own problems: They are projections of his own anxieties and desires, which center on love, career, and marriage. Each window suggests a different option for the hero. One neighbor is a desperately lonely woman. Another apartment is occupied by lusty newlyweds. A friendless bachelor musician occupies a third apartment. A shallow and promiscuous dancer lives in another. In still another is a childless married couple, who fawn pathetically over their dog to fill in the vacuum of their lives. In the most sinister apartment is a

When Pudovkin wanted to express an emotion, he conveyed it in terms of physical images—objective correlatives—taken from the actual locale. Thus, the sense of anguished drudgery is conveyed through a series of shots showing details of a cart mired in the mud: close-ups of the wheel, the mud, hands coaxing the wheel, straining faces, the muscles of an arm pulling the wheel, and so on. Eisenstein, on the other hand, wanted film to be totally free of literal continuity and context. Pudovkin’s correlatives, he felt, were too restricted by realism.

Eisenstein wanted movies to be as flexible as literature, especially to make figurative comparisons without respect to time and place. Movies should include images that are thematically or metaphorically relevant, Eisenstein claimed, regardless of whether they can be found in the locale or not. Even in his first feature, *Strike* (1925), Eisenstein intercut shots of workmen being machine-gunned with images of oxen being slaughtered. The oxen are not literally on location, but are intercut purely for metaphorical purposes. A famous sequence from *Potemkin* links three shots of stone lions: one asleep, a second aroused and on the verge of rising, and a third on its feet and ready to pounce. Eisenstein considered the sequence an embodiment of a metaphor: “The very stones roar.”
The Odessa Steps sequence from *Potemkin* (a.k.a. *The Battleship Potemkin*) is one of the most celebrated instances of editing virtuosity in the silent cinema (4–23). The sequence deals with the slaughter of civilians by Cossack troops in czarist Russia in 1905. Eisenstein prolongs the sequence by cutting to a variety of people caught up in the chaos. A mother is out for a stroll with her baby in a carriage at the top of the stairs (1). The Cossacks fire indiscriminately on the people below (2). Chaos results in the crowd on the steps (3). The mother clasps her belly where she’s been shot (4). We see a close-up of her anguished face (5). The carriage with the crying infant starts its bumpy descent down the steps (6). A young stranger in the crowd watches the runaway carriage in horror (7). A quick close-up the crying child (8). A matron in glasses looks on in terror (9). A cut back to the mother, dead on the ground (10). The young man screams as a Cossack wields a sword toward the oncoming carriage (11). A quick cut to the carriage careening down the stairs (12). A shot of the Cossack with his sword poised to slash at the carriage (13). A close-up of his frenzied features (14). The matron is shot in the eye as she screams in pain (15). The carriage and baby overturn violently (16).
A portion of the Odessa Steps sequence from *Potemkin* (Soviet Union, 1925), directed by Sergei Eisenstein.
These are merely a few shots from a much longer sequence, perhaps the best example of Eisenstein’s collision montage in practice. The director juxtaposes close-ups with long shots, vertical designs with horizontals, darks with lights, downward motions with upward, traveling shots with stationary setups, lengthy shots with brief cutaways, and so on. The sequence is so famous it has been parodied many times, most notably by Terry Gilliam in *Brazil*, Woody Allen in *Bananas*, and Peter Segal in *Naked Gun 33 1/3: The Final Insult*. Brian De Palma also paid homage to the sequence in a bravura display of editing virtuosity in *The Untouchables*.

The acting in most of Eisenstein’s movies is pretty crude, and almost all of his works suffer from their heavy-handed didacticism. Political subtlety was never one of his strong points. (Keep in mind, most of Eisenstein’s target audiences were uneducated peasants, most of whom were unfamiliar with Marxist ideology.) Nonetheless, the Odessa Steps sequence in *Potemkin* is not nearly as dated as his other works, and it retains much of its original power. The cutting is so rapid and rhythmically mesmerizing that we are caught up in the scene’s violence, its epic sweep and its poignant humanity.

**André Bazin and the Tradition of Realism**

André Bazin was not a filmmaker, but solely a critic and theorist. For a number of years, he was the editor of the influential French journal *Cahiers du Cinéma*, in which he set forth an aesthetic of film that was in sharp opposition to such formalists as Pudovkin and Eisenstein. Bazin was untainted by dogmatism. Although he emphasized the realistic nature of the cinema, he was generous in his praise of movies that exploited editing effectively. Throughout his writings, however, Bazin maintained that montage was merely one of many techniques a director could use in making movies. Furthermore, he believed that in many cases editing could actually destroy the effectiveness of a scene (4–28).

Bazin’s realist aesthetic was based on his belief that photography, TV, and cinema, unlike the traditional arts, produce images of reality automatically, with a minimum of human interference. This technological objectivity connects the moving image with the observable physical world. A novelist or a painter must represent reality by re-presenting it in another medium—through language and color pigments. The filmmaker’s image, on the other hand, is essentially an objective recording of what actually exists. No other art, Bazin felt, can be as comprehensive in the presentation of the physical world. No other art can be as realistic, in the most elementary sense of that word.

Bazin believed that the distortions involved in using formalist techniques—especially thematic editing—often violate the complexities of reality. Montage superimposes a simplistic ideology over the infinite variability of actual life. Formalists tend to be too egocentric and manipulative, he felt. They are concerned with imposing their narrow view of reality, rather than allowing reality to exist in its awesome complexity. He was one of the first to point out that such great filmmakers as Chaplin, Mizoguchi, and Murnau preserved the ambiguities of reality by minimizing editing.

Bazin even viewed classical cutting as potentially corrupting. Classical cutting breaks down a unified scene into a certain number of closer shots that correspond implicitly to a mental process. But the technique encourages us to follow the shot sequence without our being conscious of its arbitrariness. “The editor who cuts for us makes in our stead the choice which we would make in real life,” Bazin pointed out. “Without thinking, we accept his analysis because it conforms to the laws of attention, but we are deprived of a
Almost all movies compress time, condensing many months or even years into a running time of roughly two hours, the average length of most films. Zinnemann’s classic western is a rare example of a literal adherence to the unities of time, place, and action, for the entire story takes place in a breathless 84 minutes—the film’s running time.  

(United Artists)

Not all realists use an unobtrusive style of editing. Most of Lumet’s gritty New York City dramas like The Pawnbroker, Serpico, Prince of the City, and Dog Day Afternoon are based on actual events and were shot mostly in the streets of the city. All are considered masterpieces of realism, yet all of them are edited in a nervous, jumpy style that connects a wide assortment of characters and explosive events.  

(Warner Bros.)
privilege.” He believed that classical cutting subjectivizes an event because each shot represents what the filmmaker thinks is important, not necessarily what we would think.

One of Bazin’s favorite directors, the American William Wyler, reduced editing to a minimum in many of his films, substituting the use of deep-focus photography and lengthy takes. “His perfect clarity contributes enormously to the spectator’s reassurance and leaves to him the means to observe, to choose, and form an opinion,” Bazin said of Wyler’s austere cutting style. In such movies as The Little Foxes, The Best Years of Our Lives (1–20b), and The Heiress, Wyler achieved an unparalleled neutrality and transparency. It would be naive to confuse this neutrality with an absence of art, Bazin insisted, for all of Wyler’s effort tends to hide itself.

Unlike some of his followers, Bazin did not advocate a simpleminded theory of realism. He was perfectly aware, for example, that cinema—like all art—involves a certain amount of selectivity, organization, and interpretation. In short, a certain amount of distortion. He also recognized that the values of the filmmaker will inevitably influence the manner in which reality is perceived. These distortions are not only inevitable, but in most cases desirable. For Bazin, the best films were those in which the artist’s personal vision is held in delicate balance with the objective nature of the medium. Certain aspects of reality must be sacrificed for the sake of artistic coherence, then, but Bazin felt that abstraction and artifice ought to be kept to a minimum. The materials should be allowed to speak for themselves. Bazinian realism is not mere newsreel objectivity—even if there were such a thing. He believed that reality must be heightened somewhat in the cinema,

4–26 No Country for Old Men (U.S.A., 2007), with Javier Bardem, written and directed by Joel and Ethan Coen.

Though it won a slew of Oscars—including Best Picture, Best Directors, and Best Adapted Screenplay—this movie contains a gaping hole in the editing. The climactic scene is missing. French literary theorists have coined the term scène à faire—roughly, the obligatory scene, or more colloquially, the must-do scene. What’s meant by this term is that crucial scene where the protagonist and antagonist clash overtly, and their conflict is resolved in favor of one or the other. But many viewers were puzzled by what finally happens to the protagonist (played by Josh Brolin). Suddenly he’s gone. We assume he’s dead (presumably murdered by the villain, brilliantly played by Bardem). But since we don’t see him die—or for that matter, precisely who kills him—we are left with a sense of frustration over the lack of closure in the narrative.

(Miramax and Paramount Vantage)
CHAPTER FOUR
EDITING

4–27a The Sorrow and the Pity (France/Switzerland/W. Germany, 1970), directed by Marcel Ophüls.

Even in the world of documentary films, editing styles can range from ultrarealistic to ultraformalistic. Like most cinéma-vérité documentarists, Marcel Ophüls keeps editing to an absolute minimum. Implicit in the art of editing is artifice—that is, the manipulation of formal elements to produce a seductive aesthetic effect. Many documentarists believe that an edited analysis of a scene shapes and aestheticizes it—compromising its authenticity. A selected sequence of shots, even if factually based, extrapolates one person’s truth from an event and, in so doing, infuses it with an ideology. An unedited presentation, on the other hand, preserves a multiplicity of truths. (Cinema 5)


The editing style of this documentary is subjective and personal. The movie itself is almost like an intimate diary by a famous actor exploring one of his most celebrated stage roles, Shakespeare’s fascinating disciple of evil, Richard III. Pacino’s voice-over connects many of the shots, which include interviews with other actors, historical artifacts, views of Shakespeare’s Old Globe Theatre, and snippets of scenes from the play in rehearsal and performance. The movie is like a dazzling lecture/presentation by someone who is both an artist and a cool teacher. (Twentieth Century Fox)

Most documentaries fall between these two extremes, as Albert Maysles has pointed out: “We can see two kinds of truth here. One is the raw material, which is the footage, the kind of truth that you get in literature in the diary form—it’s immediate, no one has tampered with it. Then there’s the other kind of truth that comes in extracting and juxtaposing the raw material into a more meaningful and coherent storytelling form which finally can be said to be more than just raw data. In a way, the interests of the people in shooting and the people in editing (even if it’s the same individual) are in conflict with one another, because the raw material doesn’t want to be shaped. It wants to maintain its truthfulness. One discipline says that if you begin to put it into another form, you’re going to lose some of the veracity. The other discipline says if you don’t let me put this into a form, no one is going to see it and the elements of truth in the raw material will never reach the audience with any impact, with any artistry, or whatever. So there are these things which are in conflict with one another and the thing is to put it all together, deriving the best from both. It comes almost to an argument of content and form, and you can’t do one without the other.”
that the director must reveal the poetic implications of ordinary people, events, and places. By poeticizing the commonplace, the cinema is neither a totally objective recording of the physical world nor a symbolic abstraction of it. Rather, the cinema occupies a unique middle position between the sprawl of raw life and the artificially re-created worlds of the traditional arts.

Bazin wrote many articles overtly or implicitly criticizing the art of editing, or at least pointing out its limitations. If the essence of a scene is based on the idea of division, separation, or isolation, editing can be an effective technique in conveying these ideas. But if the essence of a scene demands the simultaneous presence of two or more related elements, the filmmaker ought to preserve the continuity of real time and space (4–28). He or she can do this by including all the dramatic variables within the same mise en scène—that is, by exploiting the resources of the long shot, the lengthy take, deep focus, and widescreen. The filmmaker can also preserve actual time and space by panning, craning, tilting, or tracking rather than cutting to individual shots.

John Huston’s *The African Queen* contains a shot illustrating Bazin’s principle. In attempting to take their boat down river to a large lake, the two protagonists (Humphrey Bogart and Katharine Hepburn) get sidetracked on a tributary of the main river. The tributary dwindles down to a stream and finally trickles into a tangle of reeds and mud, where the dilapidated boat gets hopelessly mired. The exhausted travelers resign themselves to a slow death in the suffocating reeds, and eventually fall asleep on the floor of the boat. The camera then cranes upward, over the reeds, where—just a few hundred yards away—is the lake. The bitter irony of the scene is conveyed by the continuous movement of the camera, which preserves the physical proximity of the boat, the intervening reeds, and the lake. If Huston had cut to three separate shots, we wouldn’t understand these spatial interrelationships, and therefore the irony would be lost.

4–28 *Safety Last (U.S.A., 1923)*, with Harold Lloyd, directed by Fred Newmeyer and Sam Taylor.

In direct opposition to Pudovkin, André Bazin believed that when the essence of a scene lies in the simultaneous presence of two or more elements, editing is ruled out. Such scenes gain their emotional impact through the unity of space, not through the juxtaposition of separate shots. In this famous sequence, for example, Lloyd’s comedy of thrills is made more comic and more thrilling by the scene’s realistic presentation: The dangling hero and the street below are kept in the same frame. Actually, the distance between the two is exaggerated by the cunning placement of the camera, and there was always at least a platform about three stories below him—“but who wants to fall three stories?” Lloyd asked. (Museum of Modern Art)
Bazin pointed out that in the evolution of movies, virtually every technical innovation pushed the medium closer to a realistic ideal: in the late 1920s, sound; in the 1930s and 1940s, color and deep-focus photography; in the 1950s, widescreen. In short, technology, not critics and theorists, usually alters technique. For example, when *The Jazz Singer* ushered in the talkie revolution in 1927, sound eclipsed virtually every advance made in the art of editing since Griffith’s day. With the coming of sound, films had to be more realistically edited, whether their directors wished them so or not. Microphones were placed on the set itself, and sound had to be recorded while the scene was being photographed. Usually the microphones were hidden—in a vase of flowers, a wall sconce, etc. Thus, in the earliest sound movies, not only was the camera restricted, but the actors were as well. If they strayed too far from the microphone, the dialogue couldn’t be recorded properly.

The effects on editing of these early talkies were disastrous. Synchronized sound anchored the images, so whole scenes were played with no cuts—a return to the “primitive” sequence shot. Most of the dramatic values were aural. Even commonplace sequences held a fascination for audiences. If someone entered a room, the camera recorded the fact, whether it was dramatically important or not, and millions of spectators thrilled to the sound of the door opening and slamming shut. Critics and filmmakers despaired: The days of the recorded stage play had apparently returned. Later these problems were solved by the invention of the blimp, a soundproof camera housing that permits the camera to move with relative ease, and by the practice of dubbing sound after the shooting is completed (see Chapter 5).

But sound also provided some distinct advantages. In fact, Bazin believed that it represented a giant leap in the evolution toward a totally realistic medium. Spoken dialogue and sound effects heightened the sense of reality. Acting styles became more sophisticated as a result of sound. No longer did performers have to exaggerate visually to compensate for the absence of voices. Talkies also permitted filmmakers to tell their stories more economically, without the intrusive titles that interspersed the visuals of silent movies. Tedious expository scenes could also be dispensed with. A few lines of dialogue easily conveyed what an audience needed to know about the premise of the story.

4–29 Utamaro and His Five Women (Japan, 1955), directed by Kenji Mizoguchi.

Bazin and his disciples were enthusiastic champions of the films of Mizoguchi. The Japanese master favored the use of lengthy takes rather than editing. He generally cut within a continuous take only when there was a sharp psychological shift within the scene. Used sparingly in this way, the cut acquires a greater dramatic impact than can be found in most conventionally edited movies. (New Yorker Films)
The use of deep-focus photography also exerted a modifying influence on editing practices. Prior to the 1930s, most cameras photographed interiors on one focal plane at a time. These cameras could capture a sharp image of an object from virtually any distance, but unless an enormous number of extra lights were set up, other elements of the picture that weren’t at the same distance from the camera remained blurred, out of focus. One justification for editing, then, was purely technical: clarity of image.

The aesthetic qualities of deep-focus photography permitted composition in depth: Whole scenes could be shot in one setup, with no sacrifice of detail, for every distance appeared with equal clarity on the screen. Deep focus tends to be most effective when it adheres to the real time-space continuum. For this reason, the technique is sometimes thought to be more theatrical than cinematic, for the effects are achieved primarily through a spatially unified mise en scène rather than a fragmented juxtaposition of shots.

Bazin liked the objectivity and tact of deep focus. Details within a shot can be presented more democratically, as it were, without the special attention that a close-up inevitably confers. Thus, realist critics like Bazin felt that audiences would be more creative—less passive—in understanding the relationships between people and things.
Unified space also preserves the ambiguity of life. Audiences aren’t led to an inevitable conclusion but are forced to evaluate, sort out, and eliminate “irrelevancies” on their own.

In 1945, immediately following World War II, a movement called neorealism sprang up in Italy and gradually influenced directors all over the world. Spearheaded by Roberto Rossellini and Vittorio De Sica, two of Bazin’s favorite filmmakers, neorealism de-emphasized editing. The directors favored deep-focus photography, long shots, lengthy takes, and an austere restraint in the use of close-ups.

When asked why he de-emphasized editing, Rossellini replied: “Things are there, why manipulate them?” This statement might well serve as Bazin’s theoretical credo. He deeply admired Rossellini’s openness to multiple interpretations, his refusal to diminish reality by making it serve an ideological thesis. “Neorealism by definition rejects analysis, whether political, moral, psychological, logical, or social, of the characters and their actions,” Bazin pointed out. “It looks on reality as a whole, not incomprehensible, certainly, but inescapably one.”

Sequence shots tend to produce (often unconsciously) a sense of mounting anxiety in the viewer. We expect setups to change during a scene. When they don’t, we often grow restless, hardly conscious of what’s producing our uneasiness. Jim Jarmusch’s bizarre comedy, Stranger Than Paradise, uses sequence shots throughout (4–32). The camera inexorably waits at a predetermined location. The young characters enter the scene and play out their tawdry, comic lives, complete with boring stretches of silence, glazed expressions of torpor, and random tics. Finally, they leave. Or they just sit there. The camera sits with them. Fade out. Very weird.

Similarly, in Rodrigo Garcia’s Nine Lives, the director explores the situations of various women who are all floundering in important relationships. Each story is shot in a single take, with no cuts. Why use such a difficult technique, when editing to different shots would be faster, cheaper, and easier? Garcia is saying that each of these nine women is trapped, unable to break out of a constricting situation, often of their own making. By confining them in a continuous take, we subconsciously sense their frustration, their...
Stranger Than Paradise (U.S.A., 1984), directed by Jim Jarmusch.

Each scene in this movie is a sequence shot—a lengthy take without cuts. Far from being "primitive," the sequence-shot technique produces a sophisticated, wry effect, bizarre and funny. In this scene, the two protagonists (John Lurie and Richard Edson) eat yet another goulash dinner while Lurie berates his stout, outspoken aunt (Cecillia Stark) for still speaking Hungarian after years of living in America. The scene's comic rhythms are accented by the staging: The bickering relatives must bend forward to see each other, while the visitor, caught in the crossfire, tries unsuccessfully to stay neutral. (Samuel Goldwyn)

The Straight Story (U.S.A., 1999), with Richard Farnsworth, directed by David Lynch.

American movies are usually edited at a fast pace without any slackness or "dead spots" between the shots. The Straight Story is a conspicuous exception. Based on true-life events, the movie is a road picture, but instead of the usual vroom-vrooming vehicles racing down streets and screeching round corners, the vehicle of choice is a '66 John Deere tractor that the elderly hero (Farnsworth) drives from Iowa to Wisconsin, where his estranged and ailing brother lives. The movie is cut at a very, very slow pace—to approximate the chugging progress of his antiquated transport. (The Straight Story, Inc. and Disney Enterprises, Inc.)
inability to break out of the impasse of their lives. A series of separate cuts would dissipate much of this tension.

Like many technological innovations, widescreen provoked a wail of protest from many critics and directors. The new screen shape would destroy the close-up, many feared, especially of the human face. There simply was too much space to fill, even in long shots, others complained. Audiences would never be able to assimilate all the action, for they wouldn’t know where to look. It was suitable only for horizontal compositions, some argued, useful for epic films, but too spacious for interior scenes and small subjects. It was appropriate only for funeral processions and snakes, sniffed one old timer. Editing would be further minimized, the formalists complained, for there would be no need to cut to something if everything was already there, arranged in a long horizontal series.

At first, the most effective widescreen films were, in fact, westerns and historical extravaganzas (4–34). But before long, directors began to use the new screen with more sensitivity. Like deep-focus photography, scope meant that they had to be more conscious of their mise en scène. More relevant details had to be included within the frame, even at its edges. Films could be more densely saturated and—potentially, at least—more effective artistically. Filmmakers discovered that the most expressive parts of a person’s face were the eyes and mouth, and consequently close-ups that chopped off the tops and bottoms of actors’ faces weren’t as disastrous as had been predicted.

Not surprisingly, the realist critics were the first to reconsider the advantages of widescreen. Bazin liked its authenticity and objectivity. Here was yet another step away from the distorting effects of editing, he pointed out. As with deep focus, widescreen helped to preserve continuity of time and space. Close shots containing two or more people could now be photographed in one setup without suggesting inequality, as deep focus often did in its variety of depth planes. Nor were the relations between people and things
fragmented as they were with edited sequences. Scope was also more realistic because the widescreen enveloped the viewer in the breadth of an experience, even with its edges—a cinematic counterpart to the eye’s peripheral vision. All the same advantages that had been applied to sound and deep focus were now applied to widescreen: its greater fidelity to real time and space; its detail, complexity, and density; its more objective presentation; its more coherent continuity; its greater ambiguity; and its encouragement of creative audience participation.

Interestingly, several of Bazin’s protégés were responsible for a return to more flamboyant editing techniques in the following decades. Throughout the 1950s, Godard, Truffaut, and Chabrol wrote criticism for *Cahiers du Cinéma*. By the end of the decade, they turned to making their own movies. The *nouvelle vague*, or New Wave as this movement was called in English, was eclectic in its theory and practice. The members of this group, who were not very tightly knit, were unified by an almost obsessional enthusiasm for film culture, especially American film culture. Although rather dogmatic in their personal tastes, the New Wave critics tended to avoid theoretical dogmatism. They believed that technique was meaningful only in terms of subject matter. In fact, it was the New Wave that popularized the idea that *what* a movie says is inextricably bound up with *how* it’s said. They insisted that editing styles ought to be determined not by fashion, the limitations of technology, or dogmatic pronouncements, but by the essence of the subject matter itself.
It’s very hard to judge a movie’s editing. You have to know what was available before the cutting even began—whether the footage was excellent to begin with (which an incompetent editor can still screw up), or whether the editor had a pile of junk to sort through before managing to sculpt at least a moderately respectable movie out of the shards he or she was presented with. “A feature-length film generates anywhere from twenty to forty hours of raw footage,” says editor Ralph Rosenblum. “When the shooting stops, that unfinished film becomes the movie’s raw material, just as the script had been the raw material before. It now must be selected, tightened, paced, embellished, and in some scenes given artificial respiration.” Annie Hall was originally conceived by Woody Allen as a story about his own character, Alvy Singer, and his various romantic and professional relationships. The character of Annie Hall (Keaton) was merely one of several plot lines. But both Allen and Rosenblum agreed that the original concept didn’t work on the cutting bench. The editor suggested cutting away most of the footage and focusing on a central love story, between Alvy and Annie Hall. The resultant romantic comedy went on to win a number of Oscars, including Best Picture, Best Director, Best Screenplay, and Best Actress for Keaton. Ironically, no award for its editor. See Ralph Rosenblum (and Robert Karen), When the Shooting Stops . . . The Cutting Begins (New York: Viking, 1979).
1. E.L.S., aerial. Dissolve to empty road across fields where rendezvous with KAPLAN is to take place. We see and hear bus arriving, door opening.

1b. THORNHILL emerges, bus leaves. He is alone. (52)

2. L.S., low angle. THORNHILL at roadside, waiting. (5)

3. E.L.S., P.O.V. Looking down main road: bus going away in distance. (4)

4. M.S. THORNHILL near sign, turns left to right, looking for someone. (3)

5. L.S., P.O.V. View across road, empty fields with posts. (4)
6. M.S. THORNHILL by sign, turns from right to left, looking. (3)

7. L.S., P.O.V. Across fields. (4)

8. M.S. THORNHILL by sign again, waiting, turns head and looks behind him. (3)

9. E.L.S., P.O.V. The field behind him, road. (4)

10. M.S. THORNHILL by sign, waiting, turning forward—long waiting feeling. (6/1)

11. E.L.S. Empty landscape across road, signs, post. (3)
12. M.S. THORNHILL by sign. Turns right. (2)

13. E.L.S. Empty main road, car coming in distance. (4)

14. M.S. THORNHILL by sign, looking at car approaching. (3/4)

15. L.S. Car goes by fast, whizzing sound, camera pans slightly to right. (1 3/4)

16. M.S. THORNHILL by sign, moves back to left, follows car with his eyes. (2)

17. E.L.S., P.O.V. Road, car going, sound recedes. (4)
18. M.S. THORNHILL by sign, hands in pockets, turns from left to right. (3)

19. L.S., P.O.V. Field across road again. (3)

20. M.S. THORNHILL by sign, same pose, still looking, turns from right to left. (2 1/4)

21. E.L.S. Road, car in distance, sounds begin. (3/4)

22. M.S. THORNHILL by sign, looking at car, no movement. (2 1/4)

23. E.L.S. Car coming closer, sound increasing. (3/4)
24. M.S. THORNHILL by sign, looking at car coming. (3)

25. L.S. Car closer, rushes past, camera pans a bit to follow it. (3)

26. M.S. THORNHILL by sign, takes hands from pockets, turns left to right to follow car. (3)

27. E.L.S. View of road, car in distance receding. (3/4)

28. M.S. THORNHILL by sign, waiting again. (2/4)

29. E.L.S. Road, truck coming; we hear its sound. (4)
30. M.S. THORNHILL by sign, sound of truck increasing. (3)

31. E.L.S. Truck coming down road, sound still increasing. (3¼)

32. M.S. THORNHILL by sign. (2¼)

33. L.S. Truck whizzes by.

33b. Kicking up dust, obscuring THORNHILL, camera pans slightly left, and he emerges out of the dust gradually. (4)

34. M.S. THORNHILL wiping dust from his eyes, turns to right. (7)
35. E.L.S. Fields across way, car coming out behind corn. (5)

36. M.S. THORNHILL by sign puzzled by car. (5)

37. E.L.S. Car making turn on dirt road. (4)

38. M.S. THORNHILL awaiting car. (3½)

39. L.S. Car nearing main road, camera pans following it to right, a sign there. (4)

40. M.S. THORNHILL waiting to see what will happen. (3½)
41. L.S. MAN getting out of car, talking to driver, we hear the door of the car slam. (3½)

42. M.S. THORNHILL reacting, wondering, getting ready to meet this man. (2)

43. L.S. Sound of car turning around, dust raised, car turns around and the MAN walks toward main road opposite THORNHILL, looking back at the car leaving. (1¾)

44. M.S. THORNHILL, closer than previous shots, eyeing the man. (1½)

45. L.S. Camera pans right slightly; the MAN goes over by the sign and turns his head to look up the road and over at THORNHILL. (4¼)

46. M.S. Same as 44. THORNHILL's reaction, his head tilts and he looks across the road. (3¾)
47. L.S., low angle. Road in the middle stretching to infinity, two men oddly stationed on either side of road, the other MAN looking up the road a bit. (7)

48. M.S. THORNHILL’s reaction, takes hands out of pockets, opens coat, puts hands on hips, contemplates situation. (6½)

49. L.S. Same as 45, only the MAN turns his head looking the other way. (3¼)

50. M.S. Same as 48, but THORNHILL has both hands on hips now, his head looking across. His head turns up road to see if anyone is coming; he looks back, one hand on hip, other at side, at MAN across way.

50b. Starts walking across road part way. (10)

51. L.S., P.O.V. The man on the other side of road, as THORNHILL crosses, camera tracks across road part way, acting as his eyes. (2½)
52. M.S. THORNHILL walks across road; synchronous tracking camera continuing movement begun in 50b.

53. L.S., P.O.V. Same as 49, 51 of other MAN across road, but camera tracks in on him, acting as THORNHILL’s eyes, continues movement begun in 50b.

54. M.S. THORNHILL on other side of road, but camera tracks to continue movement of 50, 52.

54b. Camera continues tracking to other side of road until other man comes in view and THORNHILL begins to talk to him. THORNHILL’s hands are a bit nervous in movement; he plays with his little finger; the other man has hands in pockets. THORNHILL (after a long wait): Hi! (a long pause follows) Hot day. (another pause) MAN: Seen worse. THORNHILL (after a long pause): Are you supposed to be meeting someone here? MAN: Waitin’ for the bus. Due any minute. THORNHILL: Oh. (another pause) MAN: Some of them crop duster pilots get rich if they live long enough. THORNHILL: Yeah! (very softly) (21)

55. E.L.S. Fields with plane at great distance in far left of frame coming right. (2/4)
56. M.S. Reaction shot of both looking at plane.
THORNHILL: Then ... a ... (pause) then your name isn’t Kaplan?
MAN: Can’t say that it is ’cause it ain’t. (pause) Here she comes (as he looks down the road). (11)

57. E.L.S. Bus coming down the road. MAN: (voice off) ...right on time. (2⅔)

58. M.S. Same as 56, two talking then looking again across road at crop duster.
MAN: That’s funny.
THORNHILL: What? (very softly)
MAN: That plane’s dustin’ crops where there ain’t no crops.
THORNHILL turns to look. (8)

59. E.L.S. Same as 55, field with the plane over it. (4)

60. M.S. Two men off center looking at plane. THORNHILL’s hands continue nervous movements; the other’s are in his pockets as before. Sound of approaching bus. (3½)

61. L.S. Bus arriving and coming quite close to camera. (1½)
62. M.S. MAN gets on as door of bus opens and seems to shut THORNHILL out. The bus leaves.

62b. THORNHILL puts hands on hips and looks across, then looks at his watch. For a second he is alone in the frame as the bus goes out of sight. (2/4)

63. E.L.S., P.O.V. Same as 59, what THORNHILL sees across the road; the plane goes to end of frame and turns left, toward him. (5/4)

64. M.S. THORNHILL in front of road by sign, puzzled and rather innocent looking; sound of plane approaching. (2/4)

65. E.L.S. Plane coming toward camera, still far, but closer and with sound increasing. (3/4)

66. M.S. Same as 64. THORNHILL reacting. (2/4)
67. E.L.S. Same as 65 but plane closer and louder. (2/4)  

68. M.S. Closer shot of THORNHILL, still puzzled and confused as plane comes at him. (4/4)  

69. L.S. Plane clearly coming at him, filling mid-frame, very loud. (1/4)  

70. THORNHILL drops, a short held shot, he falls out of frame at bottom. (4)  

71. L.S. THORNHILL falling on ground, both arms on ground, plane behind him, he in a hole. (3/4)  

72. L.S. Plane going away from him. (3)
73. L.S. THORNHILL on ground getting up, kneeling on left knee. (3½)

74. E.L.S. Plane going farther away and sound receding. (2¼)

75. L.S. THORNHILL getting up. (2¼)

76. E.L.S. Plane in distance banking. (2½)

77. M.S. THORNHILL up and about to run. (2¾)

78. L.S. Plane approaching again, sound getting louder. (2)
79. M.S. THORNHILL runs and falls in ditch. (1½)

80. L.S. THORNHILL in ditch, sound of plane and bullets sprayed on him, smoke; he turns head to left and faces camera to watch when plane is gone. (5½)

81. L.S. Plane getting ready again, banking. (5½)

82. M.S. THORNHILL in ditch coming up, gets up on left arm, sound of receding plane. (2½)

83. E.L.S., P.O.V. The road as THORNHILL sees it, car in distance. (2½)

84. M.S. Same as 82, THORNHILL rising from ditch, receding plane sound. (1½)
85. L.S., low angle. THORNHILL runs to road to try to stop car.

85b. He tries to flag it down. Car sounds approach and it whizzes by. (3/4)

86. M.S. THORNHILL’s back after turning left as the car whizzes by. (4/3)

87. E.L.S. Plane in distance, sounds again. (2/3)

88. L.S. THORNHILL’s back with plane in distance at far left coming at him.

88b. L.S. He looks at plane, turns around looking for a place to hide, looks at plane again, turns around and runs toward camera. Camera reverse tracks.
88c. M.S. THORNHILL running toward camera, camera reverse tracking. He turns around twice while running to look at plane; it goes over his head just missing him. (13½)

89. M.S. THORNHILL falling, side view, legs up, bullet and plane sounds. (5)

90. L.S., P.O.V. Cornfield, a place to hide. (2½)

91. M.S. THORNHILL lying flat on ground, looking. (1¾)

92. L.S. THORNHILL getting up, plane in distance banking again for new attack. (3)

93. M.S. THORNHILL running, turns back to look at plane, camera tracks with him as he runs to cornfield. (4½)
94. L.S., low angle. THORNHILL’s back as he runs into cornfield; low camera angle shows lots of ground, stalks. He disappears into corn. (2½)

95. L.S. Picture of corn; a patch reveals where THORNHILL is hiding. The corn rustles. (2)

96. M.S. Camera follows THORNHILL down as he falls on ground inside the corn patch. He turns back to look up to see if plane is coming. A cornstalk falls; then he looks down again, up again, down again, up. (7½)

97. L.S. Plane coming along edge of cornfield and over it; it gets very loud. (4½)

98. M.S. Same as 96. Corn rustles, wind from the plane blows over. THORNHILL sees he’s out of danger, and smiles a bit, feeling that he’s outwitted his pursuers. (15½)

99. L.S. Plane coming in on bend, repeating pattern of 97; it gets louder. (3½)
100. M.S. Same as 96, 98. THORNHILL in corn, getting up, looking around, suddenly aware of plane in new way; he's startled that it's coming back. (4½)

101. L.S. Plane over corn, repeating pattern of 97, only dust coming out of it; plane comes closer to camera. (7)

102. M.S. Same as 96, 98, 100; THORNHILL’s reaction to dust, which fills up screen: he coughs, takes out handkerchief, camera follows him as he raises himself up and down; coughing sounds. (12¼)

103. M.S. THORNHILL in corn, new shot; he runs toward camera trying to get out of corn; rustling corn, he looks out of field. (4½)

104. E.L.S., P.O.V. Out of cornfield, view of road as framed by corn; tiny speck on road in distance is truck. (2½)

105. M.S. THORNHILL in corn, but he is standing; he moves forward, looks back up for plane, makes dash for the truck coming down road; he goes out of frame for moment at the end. (3½)
106. L.S. THORNHILL running toward truck, gets to road from corn; truck farther along the road, sounds of truck. (4)

107. E.L.S. Plane banking over corn, getting ready to turn toward him; faint plane sounds; horn of truck. (2)

108. L.S., low angle. THORNHILL in road, truck coming, he waves at it. (1¾)

109. E.L.S. Continuation of 107, plane further left. (2)

110. M.S. THORNHILL trying to stop truck, sounds of horns, brakes. (2)

111. L.S. Truck approaching, getting bigger. (2)
112. M.S. Same as 110, but he looks at plane coming in on his left, then puts up both hands instead of one, and bites his tongue. (1/2)

113. L.S. Truck even closer, about fifty feet in front of camera. (1)

114. M.S. Same as 112, 110. THORNHILL waving frantically now. (1)

115. C.U. Grille of truck as it tries to halt; brake sounds. (1)

116. C.U. THORNHILL’s face in anguish about to be hit.

116b. His hands go up and his head goes down. (%)
117. L.S. THORNHILL falls under the truck, front view. (1)

118. M.S. THORNHILL under the truck, side view. (2¼)

119. L.S., low angle. Plane comes toward truck (and camera). (1¼)

120. L.S. Plane hits truck, view from across road. (1)

121. L.S. Truck bursts in flames; another angle of truck and plane; music begins and continues to end of scene. (2¼)

122. L.S. Shot of truck in flames from in front, two men scramble hurriedly from cab.

DIFFERER: Let's get out of here. It's going to explode. (6¾)
123. L.S. Backs of men running somewhat comically to cornfield. (2)

124. L.S. THORNHILL runs toward camera from explosions of oil truck behind him. Music tends to mute explosion sounds. (2½)

125. L.S. Reverse angle of THORNHILL as he now backs away from explosion. A car has just pulled to side of road, followed by a pickup truck with a refrigerator, which pulls to the side in front of it. Doors open and people get out. THORNHILL goes over and talks to them. No sounds are heard (the music continues), but we see his motions of explanation. (9)

126. L.S. View of explosion in distance with close-up of farmer’s arm on right. (2)

127. L.S. THORNHILL and others watch explosion. He backs away from scene to right of frame while they all move closer to the wreck as THORNHILL retreats unnoticed by them. (11)
Like many other language systems in movies, editing in the contemporary cinema has been revolutionized by the advent of digital technology. With new systems, such as Avid, Lightworks, and Apple’s Final Cut Pro, modern editors can cut a movie with phenomenal speed and flexibility. A film’s footage is entered on a computer’s hard drive, allowing the editor to try dozens of choices in a matter of minutes rather than days or even weeks when an editor had to literally cut and splice strips of celluloid.

Like most techniques, this one has been misused. Anne Coates, who edited David Lean’s *Lawrence of Arabia* as well as Steven Soderbergh’s *Erin Brockovich*, has pointed out the limitations of this new technology: “I’m not against flashy cutting; it can be great. But I don’t see the point of lots of cuts where you can’t see what’s happening at all. I think that’s going over the top with this, and it’s very easy to do on these machines.”

Some questions we ought to ask ourselves about a movie’s editing style include: How much cutting is there and why? Are the shots highly fragmented or relatively lengthy? What is the point of the cutting in each scene? To clarify? To stimulate? To lyricize? To create suspense? To explore an idea or emotion in depth? Does the cutting seem manipulative or are we left to interpret the images on our own? What kind of rhythm does the
editing establish with each scene? Is the personality of the filmmaker apparent in the cutting or is the presentation of shots relatively objective and functional? Is editing a major language system of the movie or does the film artist relegate cutting to a relatively minor function?

Further Reading


Murch, Walter, In the Blink of an Eye: A Perspective on Film Editing (Los Angeles: Silman-James, 1995). An insider’s view.


