

Invisible Storytelling

The main purpose of a mainstream Hollywood film is to tell you, the viewer, a story. But though all mainstream films are based around a plot or narrative idea and contain various scenes and sequences all of which contribute to the overall story, on a more fundamental level all films can be boiled down to just two core building blocks: the shot and the cut. As such, the use of camera and editing are crucial elements of moving image language. In the sections that you can link to below, we will explore both in closer detail.

Clips mentioned in this section are not available to view on the website but are readily available to buy or rent from the usual outlets.

As cinema first evolved in the early 20th century, a particular style of shooting and editing geared towards making film narratives easier to understand developed. This became known as the **continuity style** and from the very outset, it proved popular with both filmmakers themselves and with audiences. The continuity style has since become the moving image's most conventional and dominant mode of visual storytelling.

The most important aspect of this particular style is that it encourages you the viewer to become enthralled and captivated by a story but actively discourages you from consciously noticing the editing and camera techniques that are being used to tell it.

The **continuity style** deliberately sets out to make the camera, camerawork and editing invisible or, at the very least, unobtrusive. The events on screen seem to take place within a world of their own. They look as though they have simply been captured by some kind of unseen observer, who just happened to be watching and recording the action from convenient and suitable positions or angles. This is the key to the continuity style; its ability to tell a story whilst at the same time hiding the storytelling mechanisms themselves.

You, the audience member, are drawn into the narrative. You feel as if you are seeing the story unfolding onscreen. The techniques are deliberately used in order to effect precisely the right emotional response in you and at the right moment. The result is seamless and engaging storytelling and great filmmaking can really make us feel as if we are actually participating in an event.

In his essay 'The Film Text and Film Form' in the Oxford Guide to Film Studies, Robert P. Kolker describes the key features of the Classical Hollywood Style as they were developed in the early years of Hollywood filmmaking.

“The continuity style developed as a way to present a story in forward progression.... Early filmmakers found that, as long as they contained some narrative glue, scenes placed side by side would

be understood as occurring either simultaneously, earlier or later than one another. Shots of a woman held captive by a menacing male (or caught in some other dangerous situation) are intercut with shots of a heroic male figure moving in a direction that has been established as that of the menaced woman. The result is quite easy to follow: the man is coming to save the threatened woman.

Filmmakers developed formal methods that made shooting relatively quick and easy:

- shoot whatever scenes are most economical to shoot at a given time (shoot out of sequence when necessary)
- cover any given sequence from as many different angles as possible and with multiple takes of each angle to give the producer and editor a lot of material to choose from
- edit the material to create linear continuity, cut on movement, keep eyelines matched (maintaining the direction a person is gazing from one shot to another)

The continuity style is a form that is economical to reproduce. Once the basic methods of shooting and editing a film became institutionalised in the early part of the 20th century it was easy to keep doing it that way. Although every studio during the classical period of Hollywood production (roughly between the late 1910s to early 1950s) performed slight variations on the continuity style, its basics were constant and used by everyone.

The basic components of the classical Hollywood style are:

- Narrative flow is pieced together out of small fragments of action in such a way that the piecing together goes unnoticed and the action appears continuous.
- Sequences that occur at the same time but in different places are intercut to create narrative tension
- Dialogue sequences are constructed by a series of overtheshoulder shots from one participant in the dialogue to the other
- The gaze of the viewer is linked to the gaze of the main characters through a series of shots that show a character and then show what the character is looking at.

The result of these constructions is that narrative proceeds in a straight trajectory through time. Any transitions that break linearity (for example, flashbacks) are carefully prepared for and all narrative threads are sewn together at the end.

The continuity style is a remarkable form because of its persistence, its invisibility, and because we learn how to read it easily and without any instruction than seeing the films themselves.”

An illustration of this is the opening scene of **Rear Window**: (00:01:28 to 00:03:51) This seminal film from Alfred Hitchcock can be used to illustrate many aspects of the continuity style. This opening scene is an excellent example of how Hollywood can relay information to us without resorting to a lot of dialogue. Simply by moving the camera around and using strategically placed props (the plaster cast, the broken camera, the framed photographs, the magazine cover), we find out that the lead character is a photographer who we infer has injured himself on a dangerous assignment. And he is going out with Grace Kelly who will enter the story soon. Any scene from **Casablanca** can be used to illustrate the seamless storytelling technique of the Classical Hollywood Style. The film is analysed as a key exemplar of the continuity style in part one of the documentary series, the American Cinema, which provides a comprehensive introduction to the Classical Hollywood Style.