

Editing: An Introduction

On its most basic level, editing is simply the joining together of individual shots to create visual sequences.

There are different types of editing joins that can be used between shots, and each can serve a different purpose or function within a narrative:

The most common means of joining two shots together is the **cut**. In traditional filmmaking this involves literally trimming film with a sharp edge or razor and splicing shots together with tape or adhesive cement. Even though most editing is now carried out digitally and doesn't actually involve the physical slicing of film the term "cut" is still used. Fittingly, most digital editing systems use razor or scissor icons to represent cutting.

a **fade-out** darkens the end of a shot, turning it into black.

a **fade-in**, by contrast, lightens a shot from black

a **dissolve** briefly overlaps shots by superimposing the end of one shot onto the beginning of another

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.

Aliens (1986)

In an early scene in this sci-fi horror film a shot showing the face of our heroine Sigourney Weaver asleep in suspended animation dissolves to a shot of planet Earth. The images overlap, subtly suggesting her links with Earth and deliberately evoking associations with female religious icons like the Madonna.

a **wipe** switches from one shot to a second shot by moving a boundary line across the screen.

Once a staple of 1930's and 40's serials, including the Buck Rogers and Flash Gordon series, these are used constantly through the STAR WARS films as a means of paying homage to that era. Wipes are also featured prominently in Classic Hollywood westerns and in the Samurai films of Akira Kurosawa including Yojimbo and The Seven Samurai.

As already mentioned in the introduction to **Classical Hollywood Style**, the main editing technique to have evolved in narrative or story-based film is **Continuity Editing**, a core component of the Continuity or Classical Hollywood Style.

The basic purpose of Continuity Editing is to arrange shots together so they tell a story in a clear and easily understandable way. If footage is edited correctly in this style it should be seamless and we will too be focused on the story itself to notice the editing. That's why this editing style is often called "invisible editing."

The role of the editor is to take a selection of different footage filmed earlier, and to weave it together, creating an apparently seamless narrative, complete with the illusion of space and time. By sticking to a number of key principles, continuity editing succeeds in creating the *appearance* of continuous action, manipulating your viewing expectations and emotions, and ideally positioning you the viewer so that you become involved and engaged in the story.

The key techniques and principles used in Continuity Editing are:

the 180 Degree Rule / Axis of Action

the Eyeline Match

Shot-Reverse-Shot

Point of view Cutting

the Match on Action

Directional Continuity

Cross or Inter-Cutting

180 Degree Rule / Axis of Action – We've already mentioned that the role of continuity is to create a sense of unity in terms of space and time so that you as a viewer become fully involved in the story on a number of emotional levels. This also involves "positioning" you and giving you the best possible view of the action. If you go to the theatre, the action takes place on a stage space surrounded by three walls. You, as a member of the audience are, in a sense, looking through an invisible fourth wall. Borrowing the same idea, the assumption in film is that shots will be filmed and cut together so that you, the audience, will always be on the same side of the story's action – occupying the position of that invisible fourth wall. This creates an imaginary "180 degree axis of action" which acts as an invisible boundary for the direction of on-screen movements, character positions and glances in a scene and which the camera should not go beyond.

Stage Coach (1939)

Sometimes it is easiest to illustrate a rule by showing an example of where it has been broken. In the clip above, the camera is initially positioned on one side of the coach. It is then suddenly positioned on the opposite side. Using normal conventions, the camera's position would have moved around

the coach in stages, for example rather than immediately being positioned on the opposite side of the coach, it might have been positioned behind or in front of the coach first, thus keeping the audience's sense of orientation within the space of the scene. However, breaking conventions can and does often create new techniques which can often develop specific functions of their own. In this particular instance, the breaking of convention, though possibly an oversight, can be seen as actually heightening the tension of the scene by subconsciously disorienting the audience.

Eyeline Match – In the eyeline match, a character in one shot looks over at something that is off-screen (or out of the frame) and a cut to the next shot reveals the object the character is looking at. The line of the character's glance has therefore "matched" the two separate shots together, creating a sense of coherence and spatial orientation. The point of view of you, the viewer, is successfully linked to the point of view of the main character, again increasing your identification with him/her and your emotional involvement in the film's action.

Shot-Reverse-Shot – This is a classical device which can be used in a number of ways, but most often is seen in basic dialogue sequences. The dialogue begins with a two-shot of the participants in the scene. The cutting pattern then starts as a series of over-the-shoulder shots from one participant to the other.

Manhunter (1986): (00:21:32 to 00:26:29)

*A tense conversation between an incarcerated killer and the lawman who captured him plays out in **shot-reverse-shot**. Director Michael Mann ensures that the bars separating the two occupy the same space in each shot, deliberately blurring the lines between visitor and prisoner and suggesting a disturbing similarity between the two.*

Point of view cutting - this is a variant of the eyeline match. The structure is the same: a character looks off screen – we then cut to the object the character is looking at. However, what distinguishes point of view cutting is that the object is shown from the character's optical vantage point – i.e. directly through the character's eyes. (So if the character is drunk, for example, this might mean that the shot is deliberately out of focus with the camera moving from side to side – a rolling shot). This particular technique is even more powerful in terms of how effectively it places the audience in the position of the main character.

Match on Action – in the match on action cut, the cut from one shot to another occurs when an action is being performed, in which the action is continued from one shot to the next. It's this continuity of the same action across the cut which creates coherence and orientation, helping you the viewer find your bearings.

Directional Continuity - this refers to the movements of characters/objects across the frame. For example, if a character exits the shot from the right of the screen, he should enter the next shot from the left of the screen, moving in the same direction.

The Matrix (1999): (01:54:10 to 0:1:55:30)

As our hero Neo faces his adversary Agent Smith for a climactic showdown they face each other directly on a subway train platform station. Watch how the scattered newspapers sent flying by the recently passed train travel from left to right from Smith's side and, in a perfect match cut, from right to left on Neo's side. The fight sequence which ensues fully adheres to the rules of Directional Continuity.

Cross or Inter-Cutting – this technique is a primary narrative device and pieces together sequences that occur at the same time but in different places in order to increase narrative tension. The literary equivalent of this device is simple narrative transition such as “meanwhile” or “in another part of town”. Some films borrow these verbal clues by using inter-titles or voice-over narration.