Chapter 8
The Relation of Shot to Shot: Editing

Since the 1920s, when film theorists began to realize what editing can achieve, it has been the most widely discussed film technique. This has not been all to the good, for some writers have mistakenly found in editing the key to good cinema (or even all cinema). Yet many films, particularly in the period before 1904, consist of only one shot and hence do not depend on editing at all. Experimental films sometimes de-emphasize editing by making each shot as long as the amount of film a camera could hold, as with Michael Snow's La Région centrale and Andy Warhol's Eat, Sleep, and Empire. Such films are not necessarily less cinematic than others that rely heavily on editing.

Still, one can see why editing has exercised such an enormous fascination for film aestheticians, for as a technique it is very powerful. The role of the Rialto in The Birth of a Nation, the Odessa Steps sequence in Potemkin, the hunt sequence in The Rules of the Game, the show trial murder in Psycho, the train crash in La Ruez, the diving sequence in Olympia, Clarke's startling discovery of the killer's lair in The Silence of the Lambs, the tournament sequence in Lancelot du Lac—all of these celebrated moments derive much of their effect from editing.

Perhaps even more important, however, is the role of editing within an entire film's stylistic system. An ordinary Hollywood film typically contains between 1000 and 2000 shots; an action-based movie can have 3000 or more. This fact alone suggests that editing strongly shapes viewers' experiences, even if they are not aware of it. Editing contributes a great deal to a film's organization and its effects on spectators.

What Editing Is

Editing may be thought of as the coordination of one shot with the next. As we have seen, in film production a shot is one or more exposed frames in a series on a continuous length of film stock. The film editor eliminates unwanted footage, usually by discarding all but the best take. The editor also cuts superfluous frames, such as those showing the clapboard (p. 29), from the beginnings and endings of shots. She or he then joins the desired shots, the end of one to the beginning of another.

These joins can be of different sorts. A fade-out gradually darkens the end of a shot to black, and a fade-in accordingly lightens a shot from black. A dissolve briefly superimposes the end of shot A and the beginning of shot B (8.1–8.3). In a wipe, shot B replaces shot A by means of a boundary line moving across the screen, as in Seven Samurai (8.4). Here both images are briefly on the screen at the same time, but they do not blend, as in a dissolve. In the production process, fades, dissolves, and wipes are optical effects and are marked as such by the editor. They are typically executed in the laboratory.

The most common means of joining two shots is the cut. Until the rise of digital editing in the 1960s, a cut was made by splicing two shots together by means of cement or tape. Some filmmakers "cut" during filming by planning that the film would emerge from the camera ready for final showing. Here the physical junction from shot to shot is created in the act of shooting. Such editing in the camera, however, is rare and is mainly confined to experimental and amateur filmmaking. Editing after shooting is the norm. Today much editing is done by means of video transfers stored on discs or a hard drive, so that the cuts (or edits, in video terminology) can be made without touching film. Nevertheless the final version of the film is prepared for printing by cutting and splicing the negative footage.

As viewers, we perceive a shot as an uninterrupted segment of screen time, space, or graphic configurations. Fades, dissolves, and wipes are perceived as gradually interrupting one shot and replacing it with another. Cuts are perceived as instantaneous changes from one shot to another.

Consider an example of editing: four shots from the first attack on the Dachau Bay in Alfred Hitchcock's film The Birds (8.5–8.8):

1. Medium shot, straight-on angle, Melanie, Mitch, and the Captain standing by the restaurant window talking, Melanie on extreme right, bartender in background (8.5).

2. Medium close-up, Melanie by Captain's shoulder. She looks to right (out of screen window) and up, as if looking with eyes. Pan right with her as she turns to the window and looks out (8.6).

3. Extreme long shot, Melanie's point of view. Gas station across street, phone booth in left foreground, birdborne attendant, right to left (8.7).

4. Medium close-up, Melanie, profile. Captain moves right into shot, blocking out bartender; Mitch moves right into extreme foreground. All in profile look out window (8.8).

Each of these four shots presents a different segment of time, space, and pictorial information. The first shot shows three people talking. An instantaneous change—a cut—shifts us to a medium close-up shot of Melanie. (Hitchcock could have used a fade, dissolve, or wipe instead, with a slower change from shot to shot.)

"Editing is the basic creative force, by power of which the soulless photographs (the separate shots) are engineered into living, cinematic form."—V.E. Patduk, director

"You can definitely help performances in the cutting room, by interesting reaction, maybe recording lines, adding lines over reaction shots. And you can help a film's structure by moving sequences about and dropping scenes that hold up pacing. And sometimes you can use bits and pieces from different takes, which also helps a lot. What you can do in the editing room to help a film is amazing."
—John Foster, actor and director

8.1 The first shot of The Maltese Falcon leads to...
8.2 ...a dissolve to...
8.3 The second shot.
or he could have handled the scene as one continuous shot, as we shall see presently. In the second shot, space has changed (Melanie is isolated and larger in the frame), time is continuous, and the graphic configurations have changed (the arrangements of the shapes and colors vary). Another cut takes us instantly to what she sees. The gas station shot (8.7) presents a very different space, a successive bit of time, and a different graphic configuration. Another cut returns us to Melanie (8.8), and again we are shifted instantly to another space, the next slice of time, and a different graphic configuration. Thus the four shots are joined by three cuts.

Hitchcock could have presented the *Birds* scene without editing. Imagine a camera movement that frames the four people talking, tracks in, and rightward to Melanie as she turns, pans rightward to the window to show the dive-bombing gull, and pans leftward back to catch the group’s expressions. This would constitute one shot, although the camera movements, no matter how fast, would not present the marked and abrupt shifts that cuts produce. Now imagine a deep-space composition that presents Hitch in the foreground, Melanie and the window in the middle ground, and the gull attack in the distance. Again, the scene could now be played in one shot, for we would have no abrupt change of time or space or graphics. And the movements of the figures would not yield the jumps in time, space, and composition provided by editing.

Although some films are shot with several cameras running simultaneously, throughout film history most sequences have been shot with only one camera. In *The Birds* scene, for example, the shots were taken at different times and places—one (shot 3) outdoors, the others in a sound stage (and these perhaps on different days). A film editor must assemble a large and varied batch of footage. To create this task, most filmmakers plan for the editing phase during the preparation and shooting phases. Shots are taken with an idea of how they will eventually fit together. In fictional filming, scripts and storyboards help plan editing, while documentary filmmakers often shoot with an eye to how the footage will be cut.

**Dimensions of Film Editing**

Editing offers the filmmaker four basic areas of choice and control:

1. Graphic relations between shot A and shot B
2. Rhythmic relations between shot A and shot B
3. Spatial relations between shot A and shot B
4. Temporal relations between shot A and shot B

Graphic and rhythmic relationships are present in the editing of any film. Spatial and temporal relationships may be irrelevant to the editing of films using abstract form, but they are present in the editing of films built out of representational images (that is, the great majority of motion pictures). Let us trace the range of choice and control in each area.

**Graphic Relations between Shot A and Shot B**

The four shots from *The Birds* may be considered purely as graphic configurations, as patterns of light and dark, line and shape, volumes and depths, movement and stasis—indepedent of the shot’s relation to the time and space of the story. For instance, Hitchcock has not drastically altered the overall brightness from shot to shot. But he could have cut from the uniformly lit second shot (8.6, Melanie turning to the window) to a shot of the gas station swashed in darkness. Moreover, Hitchcock has usually kept the most important part of the composition roughly in the center of the frame. (Compare Melanie’s position in the frame with that of the gas station in 8.7.) He could, however, have cut from a shot in which Melanie was in, say, upper frame left to a shot locating the gas station in the lower right of the frame.

Hitchcock has also played off certain color differences. Melanie’s hair and outfit make her a predominantly yellow and green figure, whereas the shot of the gas station is dominated by drab bluish grays set off by touches of red in the gas pumps. Alternatively, Hitchcock could have cut from Melanie to another figure composed of similar colors. Furthermore, the movement in Melanie’s shot—her turning to the window—does not blend into the movements of either the attendant or the gull in the next shot, but Hitchcock could have echoed Melanie’s movement in speed, direction, or frame placement by movement in the next shot.

In short, editing together any two shots permits the interaction, through similarity and difference, of the purely pictorial qualities of those two shots. The four aspects of mise-en-scene (lighting, setting, costume, and the behavior of the figures in space and time) and most cinematographic qualities (photography, framing, and camera mobility) all furnish potential graphic elements. Thus every shot provides possibilities for purely graphic editing, and every cut creates some sort of graphic relationship between two shots.

At one level we perceive all film images as configurations of graphic material, and every film manipulates those configurations. Indeed, even in a film that is not pure abstraction, graphic editing can be a source of interest to filmmaker and audience.

Graphics may be edited to achieve smooth continuity or abrupt contrast. The filmmaker may link shots by graphic similarities, thus making what we can call a *graphic match*. Shapes, colors, overall composition, or movement in shot A may be picked up in the composition of shot B. A minimal instance is the cut that joins the first two shots of David Byrnes’s *True Stories* (8.9, 8.10). Similarly, in the "Beautiful Girl" song in Stanley Donen and Gene Kelly’s *Singin’ in the Rain*, matching graphic matches are achieved through dissolve from one fashionably dressed woman to another, each figure posed and framed quite similarly from shot to shot.

More dynamic graphic matches appear in Akira Kurosawa’s *Seven Samurai*. After the samurai have first arrived at the village, an alarm sounds and they race to discover its source. Kurosawa cuts together six shots of different running samurai, which he dynamically matches by means of composition, lighting, setting, figure movement, and camera movement (8.11–8.16).

Filmmakers often call attention to graphic matches at transitional moments (8.17–8.22). Such precise graphic matching is relatively rare. Still, an approximate graphic continuity from shot A to shot B is typical of most narrative cinema. The
director will usually strive to keep the center of interest roughly constant across the cut, to maintain the overall lighting level, and to avoid strong color clashes from shot to shot. In Juzo Itami’s Tampopo, an aspiring cook is trying to learn the secret of good noodles, and she questions a successful cook. Their confrontation is presented through head-on framings. Alternating shots keep each main character’s face on the right side of each frame (8.23, 8.24).

Editing need not be graphically continuous. Mildly discontinuous editing may appear in widescreen compositions organized around characters facing one another. (Later we will study this editing pattern as shot/reverse-shot cutting.) A scene from Quentin Tarantino’s Pulp Fiction places the two women opposite each other in a restaurant booth, each framed distinctly off-center (8.25, 8.26). Compared to the Finney example, the cut here creates greater graphic discontinuity. Note, however, that the cut does balance the frame area from shot to shot: Each man fills the space left empty in the previous shot. In addition, each man’s face is just above the horizontal center of each frame, so that the spectator’s eye can easily adjust to the changing composition. If asked afterward, many viewers would probably not recall that these compositions were unbalanced.

Graphically discontinuous editing can be more noticeable. Orson Welles frequently strives for a clash from shot to shot, as in Citizen Kane when the dark long shot of Kane’s bedroom is followed by the bright opening title of the “News on the March” reel. Similarly, in Touch of Evil, Welles dissolves from a shot of Menzies looking out a window on frame right (8.27) to a shot of Susan Vargas looking out a different window on frame left (8.28). The clash is further accented by contrasting screen positions of the window reflections. Alain Resnais’s Night and Fog began something of a fad by utilizing an extreme but apt graphic conflict: Color footage of an abandoned concentration camp today is cut together with black-and-white newsreel shots of the camps in the period 1942–1945. Even here, though, Resnais found striking similarities in shape, as when a tracking shot of fence posts graphically matches a low-angle shot of marching Nazi legs.

A director may call on editing to create a graphic conflict between color qualities. In Paris, Texas, the protagonist discovers his wife working in an erotic peepshow. Wim Wenders follows the couple’s conversation by cutting from the customer’s side of the glass to the performer’s (8.29, 8.30). Although both people are visible in each shot, the cutting stresses their separation by black color contrasts.

8.20 Satyajit Ray’s World of Apu ends one scene with a view of a movie screen, then dissolves...

8.21 ...to the rectangular window of a taxi cab...

8.22 ...with the camera then moving back to show Apu and his wife riding home from the theater.

8.23 The woman and her friend, the cowboy truck driver...

8.24 ...confront the enraged cook and his assistant. The key characters are made prominent by being placed in the same area of each shot.
Earlier in the *Birds* sequence discussed above, Hitchcock puts graphic conflict to good use. Gasoline spurtng from the pump has flowed across the street to a parking lot, and Melanie, along with several other people at the restaurant window, has seen a man accidentally set the gasoline alight. His car ignites, and an explosion of flame engulfs him. What we see next is Melanie watching helplessly as the flame races along the trail of gas toward the station. Hitchcock cuts the shots as shown in 8.31-8.41:

**Shot 30.** (ls) High angle, Melanie's POV. Flaming car, spreading flames (8.31). 73 frames

**Shot 31.** (msu) Straight-on angle, Melanie, immobile, looking off left, mouth open (8.32). 20 frames

**Shot 32.** (ma) High angle, Melanie's POV. Pan with flames moving from lower right to upper left of trail of gasoline (8.33). 18 frames

**Shot 33.** (msu) as 31, Melanie, immobile, staring down center (8.34). 16 frames

**Shot 34.** (ma) High angle, Melanie's POV. Pan with flames moving from lower right to upper left (8.35). 14 frames

**Shot 35.** (msu) as 31, Melanie, immobile, looking off right, staring agast (8.36). 12 frames

**Shot 36.** (ls) Melanie's POV. Gas station, flames rushing in from right, Mitch, sheriff, and attendant run out left (8.37). 10 frames

**Shot 37.** (msu) as 31, Melanie, immobile, stares off extreme right (8.38). 8 frames

**Shot 38.** (ls) as 36, Melanie's POV. Cars at station explode (8.39). 34 frames

**Shot 39.** (msu) as 31, Melanie covers her face with her hands (8.40). 33 frames

**Shot 40.** (es) Extreme high angle on city, flaming trail in center. Gulls fly into shot (8.41).

In graphic terms, Hitchcock has exploited two possibilities of contrast. First, although each shot's composition centers the action (Melanie's head, the flaming trail), the movements thrust in different directions. In shot 31 Melanie looks to the lower left, whereas in shot 32 the fire moves to the upper left. In shot 33 Melanie is looking down center, whereas in the next shot the flames still move to the upper left, and so on.
More important—and what makes the sequence impossible to recapture on the printed page—is a crucial contrast of mobility and static. The shots of the flames present movement of both the subject (the flames rushing along the gas) and of the camera (which pans to follow). But the shots of Melanie could almost be still photographs, since they are absolutely static. She does not turn her head within the shots, and the camera does not track in or away from her. Interestingly too, instead of showing her turning to watch the flames, Hitchcock presents only static stages of her action, and so we must infer the progress of her attention. By making movement conflict with countermovement and with stillness, Hitchcock has powerfully exploited the graphic potentials of editing.

Rhythmic Relations between Shot A and Shot B

Each shot, being a strip of film, is of a certain length, measured in frames, feet, or meters. And the shot's physical length corresponds to a measurable duration on-screen. As we know, at sound speed, 24 frames last one second in projection. A shot can be as short as a single frame, or it may be thousands of frames long, running for many minutes when projected. Editing thus allows the filmmaker to determine the duration of each shot. When the filmmaker adjusts the length of shots in relation to one another, she or he is controlling the rhythmic potential of editing.

As we have already seen (pp. 217–218), rhythm in cinema includes many factors—principally accent, beat, and tempo. And cinematic rhythm as a whole derives not only from editing but from other film techniques as well. The filmmaker also relies on movement in the mise-en-scene, camera position and movement, the rhythm of sound, and the overall context to determine the editing rhythm. Nevertheless, the patterning of shot lengths contributes considerably to what we intuitively recognize as a film's rhythm.

Sometimes the filmmaker will use shot duration to create a stressed, accented, moment. In one sequence of The Road Warrior, a ferocious gang member butts his head against that of a victim. At the moment of contact, director George Miller cuts in a few frames of pure white. The result is a sudden flash that suggests violent impact. Alternatively, a shot's duration can be used to deaccentuate an action. During test screenings of Raiders of the Lost Ark, Steven Spielberg discovered that after Indiana Jones shoots the gigantic swordsman, several seconds had to be added to allow the audience's reaction to die down before the action could resume.

More commonly, the rhythmic possibilities of editing emerge when several shot lengths form a discernible pattern. A steady, metrical, beat can be established by making all of the shots approximately the same length. The filmmaker can also create a dynamic pace. Steadily lengthening shots can generate a gradually slowing tempo, while successively shorter shots can create an accelerating one.

Consider how Hitchcock handles the tempo of the first gun attack in The Birds. Shot 1, the medium shot of the group talking (8.5), consists almost a thousand frames, or about 41 seconds. But shot 2 (8.6), which shows Melanie looking out the window, is much shorter—309 frames (about 13 seconds). Even shorter is shot 3 (8.7), which lasts only 55 frames (about 2½ seconds). The fourth shot (8.8), showing Melanie joined by Mitch and the Captain, lasts only 35 frames (about 1½ seconds). Clearly Hitchcock is accelerating the pace at the beginning of what will be a tense sequence.

In what follows, Hitchcock makes the shots fairly short, but subordinates the length of the shot to the internal rhythm of the dialogue and the movement in the images. As a result, shots 5 through 29 (not shown here) have no fixed pattern of lengths. But once the essential components of the scene have been established, Hitchcock returns to strongly accelerating cutting.
In presenting Melanie's horrified realization of the flames racing from the parking lot to the gas station, shots 30 through 40 (8.31–8.41) climax the rhythmic intensification of the sequence. As the description on p. 301 shows, after the shot of the spreading flames (shot 30, 8.31), each shot decreases in length by two frames, from 20 frames (50% of a second) to 8 frames (1/6 of a second). Two shots, 38 and 39, then punctuate the sequence with almost identical durations (a little less than 1/2 seconds each). Shot 40 (8.41), a long shot that lasts over 600 frames, functions as both a pause and a suspenseful preparation for the new attack. The scene's variations in rhythm alternate between rendering the savagery of the attack and generating suspense as we await the next onslaught.

We have had the luxury of counting frames on the actual strip of film. The theater viewer cannot do this, but she or he does feel and recognize the shifting tempo in this sequence because of the changing shot durations. In general, by controlling the rhythm, the filmmaker controls the amount of time we have to grasp and reflect on what we see. A series of rapid shots, for example, leaves us little time to think about what we are watching. In the Birds sequence, Hitchcock's editing impels the viewer's perception to move at a faster and faster pace. Quickly grasping the progress of the fire and understanding Melanie's changes in position become essential factors in the arising excitement of the scene.

Hitchcock is not, of course, the only director to use rhythmic editing. Its possibilities were explored by such directors as D. W. Griffith (especially in Intolerance) and Abel Gance. In the 1920s the French Impressionist filmmakers and the Soviet Montage school explored the rhythmic possibilities of strings of short shots (pp. 475–479, 478–481). When sound films became the norm, pronounced rhythmic editing survived in dramas such as Lewis Milestone's All Quiet on the Western Front as well as in musical comedies and fantasies such as Rene Clair's A Nous la liberté and Le Million, Robert Mamoulian's Love Me Tonight, and Busby Berkeley's dance sequences in 42nd Street and Footlight Parade. In classical Hollywood cinema the rhythmic use of dissolve became crucial to the montage sequence, which we shall discuss shortly. Rhythm remains a fundamental resource of the editor, most notably in the use of fast cutting to build up excitement during an action sequence, a television advertisement, or a music video.

Spatial Relations Between Shot A and Shot B

Editing usually serves not only to convey graphics and rhythm but also to construct film space as well. Exemplification in this newly discovered power can be sensed in the writings of such filmmakers as the Soviet director Dziga Vertov: "I am Kinoeye. I am builder. I have placed you... in an extraordinary room which did not exist until just now when I also created it. In this room there are twelve walls, shot by me in various parts of the world. In bringing together shots of walls and details, I've managed to arrange them in an order that is pleasing."

Such election is understandable. Editing lets the omniscient range of knowledge become visible as omnipresence, the ability to move from one spot to any other. Editing permits the filmmaker to relate any two points in space through similarity, difference, or development.

The director might, for instance, start with a shot that establishes a whole and follow this with a shot of a part of this space. This is what Hitchcock does in shot 1 and shot 2 of the Birds sequence (8.5, 8.6): a medium long shot of the group of people followed by a medium shot of only one, Melanie. Such analytical breakdown is a very common editing pattern, especially in classical continuity editing.

Alternatively, the filmmaker could construct a whole space out of component parts. Hitchcock does this later in the Birds sequence. Note that in 8.5 through 8.8 and in shots 30–39 (8.31–8.40) we do not see an establishing shot including Melanie and the gas station. In production the restaurant window need not have been across from the station at all; they could have been filmed in different cities or countries. Yet we are compelled to believe that Melanie is across the street from the gas station. The bird cry offscreen and the mise-en-scene (the window and Melanie's sideways glance) contribute considerably as well. It is, however, primarily the editing that creates the spatial whole of restaurant-and-gas-station.

Such spatial manipulation through cutting is fairly common. In documentaries compiled from newsreel footage, for example, one shot might show a cannon firing, and another shot might show a shell hitting its target; we infer that the cannon fired the shell (though the shots may show entirely different battles). Again, if a shot of a speaker is followed by a shot of a cheering crowd, we assume a spatial consistence.

The possibility of such spatial manipulation was examined by the Soviet filmmaker Lev Kuleshov, who during the 1920s shot and cut "experiments" in constructing spatial relations by eliminating establishing shots. The most famous of these involved the cutting of neutral shots of an actor's face with other shots (variably reported as shots of soup, nature scenes, a dead woman, a baby). The reported result was that the audience immediately assumed not only that the actor's expression changed but also that the actor was reacting to things present in the same space as himself. Similarly, Kuleshov cut together shots of actors, "looking at each other" but on Moscow streets miles apart, then meeting and strolling together—looking at the White House in Washington. Although filmmakers had used such cutting before Kuleshov's work, film scholars call the Kuleshov effect any series of shots that in the absence of an establishing shot prompts the spectator to infer a spatial whole on the basis of seeing only portions of the space.

The Kuleshov effect can conjure up robust cinematic illusions. In Corey Yuen's Legend of Fong Sai-Yuk, a martial-arts bout between the hero and an adept woman begins on a platform but then moves into the audience—or rather, onto the audience, for the two fight while balancing on the heads and shoulders of the crowd. Yuen's rapid editing conveys the scene's point by means of the Kuleshov effect (8.42, 8.43). In production, this meant that the combatants could be hung on wires or bars suspended outside the frame, as in 8.43. Across many shots, Yuen provides only a few brief full-figure framings showing Fong Sai-Yuk and the woman.

8.42 The Legend of Fong Sai-Yuk: A shot of the woman's upper body is followed by...

8.43 ...a shot of her legs and feet, supported by unwilling bystanders.
While the viewer doesn’t normally notice the Kuleshov effect, a few films call attention to it. Carl Reiner’s Dead Men Don’t Wear Plaid mixes footage filmed in the present with footage from Hollywood movies of the 1940s. Thanks to the Kuleshov effect, Dead Men creates unified scenes in which Steve Martin converses with characters who were originally featured in other films. In A Movie, Bruce Conner makes a joke of the Kuleshov effect by cutting from a submarine captain peering through a periscope to a woman gazing at the camera, as if they could see each other (5.60, 5.61, p. 160).

In the Kuleshov effect, editing cues the spectator to infer a single locale. Editing can also emphasize action taking place in separate places. In Intolerance, D.W. Griffith cuts from ancient Babylon to Gethsemane, from France in 1572 to America in 1916. Such parallel editing, or crosscutting, is a common way films construct a variety of spaces.

More radically, the editing can present spatial relations as being ambiguous and uncertain. In Carl Dreyer’s La Passion de Jeanne d’Arc, for instance, we know only that Jeanne and the priests are in the same room. Because the neutral white backgrounds and the numerous close-ups provide no orientation to the entire space, we can seldom tell how far apart the characters are or precisely who is beside whom. We shall see later how films can create even more extreme spatial discontinuities.

Temporal Relations between Shot A and Shot B

Like other film techniques, editing can control the time of the action denoted in the film. In a narrative film especially, editing usually contributes to the plot’s manipulation of story time. You will recall that Chapter 3 pointed out three areas in which plot time can cue the spectator to construct the story time: order, duration, and frequency. Our Bird’s example (8.3–8.8) shows how editing reinforces all three areas of control.

First, there is the order of presentation of events. The men talk, then Melanie turns away, then she sees the gull swoop, then she responds. Hitchcock’s editing presents these story events in the 1-2-3-4 order of his shots. But he could have shuffled the shots into a different order. Transposing shot 2 and shot 3 would be unusual, but it is possible to put the shots in any order at all, even reverse (4-3-2-1). This is to say that the filmmaker may control temporal succession through the editing.

As we saw in Chapter 3, such manipulation of events leads to changes in story–plot relations. We are most familiar with such manipulations in flashbacks, which present one or more shots out of their presumed story order. In Hiroshima mon amour, Renais uses the protagonist’s memory to motivate a violation of temporal order. Three shots (8.44–8.46) suggest visually that the position of her current lover’s hand triggers a recollection of another lover’s death years before. In contemporary cinema, brief flashbacks to key events may brutally interrupt present-time action. The Fugitive uses this technique to return obsessively to the murder of Dr. Kimball’s wife, the event that initiated the story’s action. In Errol Morris’s documentary The Thin Blue Line, present-day interrogations of suspects and witnesses are interspersed with reenactments that function as flashbacks to the central crime.

A much rarer option for recording story events is the flashforward. Here the editing moves from the present to a future event and then returns to the present. A small-scale instance occurs in The Godfather. Don Vito Corleone talks with his sons Tom and Sonny about their upcoming meeting with Solozzo, the gangster who is asking them to finance his narcotics traffic. As the Corleones talk in the present, shots of them are interspersed with shots of Solozzo going to the meeting in the future (8.47–8.49). The editing is used to provide exposition about Solozzo while also moving quickly to the Don’s announcement, at the gangsters’ meeting, that he will not involve the family in the drug trade.

Filmakers may use flashforwards to tease the viewer with glimpses of the eventual outcome of the story action. The end of They Shoot Horses, Don’t They? is hinted at in brief shots that periodically interrupt scenes in the present. Such flashforwards create a sense of a narrative with a powerful range of story knowledge.

We may assume, then, that if a series of shots traces a 1-2-3 order in the presentation of story events, it is because the filmmaker has chosen to do that, not because of any necessity of following this order. Editing also offers ways for the filmmaker to alter the duration of story events as presented in the film’s plot.
In our sample sequence from The Birds, the duration of the story events is presented whole. Melanie's act of turning consumes a certain length of time, and Hitchcock does not alter the duration of the event in his editing. Nevertheless, he could have. Imagine cutting from shot 1 (the man talking and Melanie standing by) to a shot of Melanie already turned and looking out the window. The time it took her to turn to the window would be eliminated by the cut. Thus editing can create a temporal ellipsis.

Elliptical editing presents an action in such a way that it consumes less time on the screen than it does in the story. The filmmaker can create an ellipsis in three principal ways.

Suppose that a director wants to show a man climbing a flight of stairs, but does not want to show the entire duration of his climb. The director could use a conventional punctuation shot change, such as a dissolve or a wipe or a fade; in the classical filmmaking tradition, such a device signals that some time has been omitted. Our director could simply dissolve from a shot of the man starting at the bottom of the stairs to a shot of him reaching the top.

Alternatively, the filmmaker could show the man at the bottom of the staircase and let him walk up out of the frame, hold briefly on the empty frame, then cut to an empty frame of the top of the stairs and let the man enter the frame. The empty frame on either side of the cut cover the elided time.

Also, the filmmaker can create an ellipsis by means of a cutaway: a shot of another event elsewhere that will not last as long as the elided action. In our example, the director might start with the man climbing but then cut away to a woman in her apartment. We could then cut back to the man much further along in his ascent.

In our Birds example, Hitchcock could also have controlled the duration of the action by expansion, the opposite of ellipsis. For example, he might have extended shot 1 so as to include the beginning of Melanie's act of turning, then shown her beginning to turn in shot 2 as well. This would have prolonged the action, stretching it out past its story duration. The Russian filmmakers of the 1920s made frequent use of temporal expansion through such overlapping editing, and no one mastered it more thoroughly than Sergei Eisenstein. In Strike when Factory workers bowl over a foreman with a large wheel hanging from a crane, two shots expand the action (8.50-8.52). In October Eisenstein overlaps several shots of rising bridges in order to stress the significance of the moment. In Ivan the Terrible friends pour golden coins down on the newly crowned Ivan in a torrent that seems never to cease. In all of these sequences the duration of the action is prolonged through noticeably overlapping the movements from shot to shot.

So much for order and duration in editing. What about frequency? Returning once more to the temporal relations in the Birds segment, we note that in the story Melanie turns to the window only once and the gull swoops only once. And Hitchcock presents these events on the screen the same number of times that they occur in the story. But, of course, Hitchcock could have repeated any of these shots. Melanie could have been shown turning to the window several times; this would be not merely overlapping a phase of an action but rather full-scale repetition.

If this sounds peculiar, it is doubtless because we are accustomed to seeing a shot present the action only once. Yet its very rarity may make repetition a powerful editing resource. In Bruce Conner's Report there is a newreel shot of Ida and Jacqueline Kennedy riding a limousine down a Dallas street. The shot is systematically repeated, in part or in whole, over and over, building up tension in our expectations as the shot seems to move by tiny increments closer to the moment of the inevitable assassination. Occasionally in Do the Right Thing, Spike Lee cuts together two takes of the same action, as when we twice see a garbage can fly through the air and break the pizzeria window at the start of the riot. Jackie Chan often shows his most virtuosic stunts three or four times in a row from different angles to allow the audience to marvel at his daring and dexterity (8.53-8.55).
Graphics, rhythm, space, and time, then, are at the service of the filmmaker through the technique of editing. Our brief survey should suggest that the potential range of these areas of control is virtually unlimited. Yet most films we see make use of a very narrow set of editing possibilities—so narrow, indeed, that we can speak of a dominant editing style throughout Western film history. This is what is usually called continuity editing. Still, the most familiar way to edit a film is not the only way to edit a film, and so we will also consider some alternatives to continuity editing.

CONTINUITY EDITING

Around 1900–1910, as filmmakers started to use editing, they sought to arrange their shots so as to tell a story coherently and clearly. Thus editing, supported by specific strategies of cinematography and mise-en-scène, was used to ensure narrative continuity. So powerful is this style that, even today, anyone working in narrative filmmaking around the world is expected to be thoroughly familiar with it.

The basic purpose of the continuity system is to create a smooth flow from shot to shot. All of the possibilities of editing we have already examined are turned to this end. First, graphic qualities are usually kept roughly continuous from shot to shot. The figures are balanced and symmetrically deployed in the frame; the overall lighting tonality remains constant; the actor occupies the central zone of the screen.

Second, the rhythm of the cutting is usually made dependent on the camera distance of the shot. Long shots are left on the screen longer than medium shots, and medium shots are left on longer than close-ups. The assumption is that the spectator needs more time to take in the shots containing more details. In scenes of physical action like the fire in The Birds, accelerated editing rhythms may be present, but the shorter shots will tend to be closer views.

Since the continuity style seeks to present a story, however, it is chiefly through the handling of space and time that editing furthers narrative continuity.

Spatial Continuity: The 180° System

In the continuity style the space of a scene is constructed along what is called variously the axis of action, the center line, or the 180° line. The scene's action—a person walking, two people conversing, a car racing along a road—is assumed to take place along a discernible, predictable line. This axis of action determines a half-circle, or 180° area, where the camera can be placed to present the action. Consequently, the filmmaker will plan, film, and edit the shots so as to respect this center line. The camera work and mise-en-scène in each shot will be manipulated to establish and reiterate the 180° space.

Consider the bird's-eye view in 8.56. We have a girl and a boy conversing. The axis of action is that imaginary line connecting the two people. Under the continuity system, the director would arrange the mise-en-scène and camera placement so as to establish and sustain this line. The camera can be put at any point as long as it stays on the same side of the line (hence the 180° term). A typical series of shots would be: (1) a medium shot of the girl and boy; (2) a shot over the girl's shoulder, favoring the boy; (3) a shot over the boy's shoulder, favoring the girl. But to cut to a shot from camera position X, or from any position within the tinted area, would be considered a violation of the system because it crosses the axis of action. Indeed, some handbooks of film directing call shot X badly wrong. To see why, we need to examine what happens if a filmmaker follows the 180° system.

The 180° system ensures that relative positions in the frame remain consistent. In the shots taken from camera positions 1, 2, and 3, the characters remain in the same positions in the frame relative to each other. Even though we see them from different angles, the girl is always on the left and the boy is always on the right. But if we cut to shot X, the characters will switch positions in the frame. An advocate of traditional continuity would claim that shot X confuses us: Have the two characters somehow swiveled around each other?
"... what I call "new braudelism" in cinema... is a form of naivete, because it's made by people who I think don't really have a grasp of cinema's history. It's the MTV kind of editing, where the main idea is that the more disorienting it is, the more exciting. And you see it creeping into mainstream cinema more and more. You look at something like Amélie and you see all the things that would have been forbidden in classical cinema, like crossing the line, camera jumping from side to side. It is a way to artificially generate excitement, but it doesn't really have any basis to it. And I find it kind of sad, because it's like an old man trying to dress like a teenager."

— John Boorman, director

The 180° system ensures consistent eyelines. In shots 1, 2, and 3, the girl is looking right and the boy is looking left. Shot X violates this pattern by making the girl look to the left.

The 180° system ensures consistent screen direction. Imagine now that the girl is walking left to right; her path constitutes the axis of action. As long as our shots do not cross this axis, cutting them together will keep the screen direction of the girl's movement constant, from left to right. But if we cross the axis and film a shot from the other side, the girl will now appear on the screen as moving from right to left. Such a cut could be disorienting.

Consider a similar situation to that in 8.56, a standard scene of two cowboys meeting for a shootout on a town street (8.27). Cowboy A and Cowboy B form the 180° line, but here A is walking from left to right and B is approaching from right to left, both seen in the shot taken from camera position 1. A closer view, from camera position 2, shows B still moving from right to left. A third shot, from camera position 3, shows A walking, as he had been in the first shot, from left to right.

But imagine that this third shot was instead taken from position X, on the opposite side of the line. A is now seen as moving from right to left. Has he taken fright and turned around while the second shot, of B, was on the screen? The filmmakers may want us to think that he is still walking toward his adversary, but the change in screen directions could make us think just the opposite. A cut to a shot taken from any point in the colored area would create this change in direction. Such breaks in continuity can be confusing.

Even more disorienting would be crossing the line while establishing the scene's action. In our shootout, if the first shot shows A walking from left to right and the second shot shows B (from the other side of the line) also walking left to right, we would probably not be sure that they were walking toward each other. The two cowboys would seem to be walking in the same direction at different points on the street, as if one were following the other. We would very likely be startled if they suddenly came face to face within the same shot.

The 180° system prides itself on delineating space clearly. The viewer should always know where the characters are in relation to one another and to the setting. More important, the viewer always knows where he or she is with respect to the story action. The space of the scene, clearly and unambiguously unfolded, does not jar or disorient, because such disorientation, it is felt, will distract the viewer from the center of attention: the narrative chain of causes and effects.

**Continuity Editing: A Case Study**

We saw in Chapter 3 that the classical Hollywood mode of narrative subordinates time, motivation, and other factors to the cause-effect sequence. We also saw how mise-en-scene and camera work may present narrative material. Now we can note how, on the basis of the 180° principle, filmmakers have developed the continuity system as a way to build up a smoothly flowing space that remains subordinate to narrative action. Let us consider a concrete example, the opening of John Huston's film *The Maltese Falcon*.

The scene begins in the office of detective Sam Spade. In the first two shots this space is established in several ways. First, there is the office window (shot 1a, 8.58), from which the camera tilts down to reveal Spade (shot 1b, 8.59) rolling a cigarette. As Spade says, "Yes, sweetheart," shot 2 (8.60) appears. This is important in several respects. It is an establishing shot, delineating the overall space of the office: the door, the intervening area, the desk, and Spade's position. Note also that shot 2 establishes a 180° line between Spade and his secretary, Effie. Effie could be the girl in 8.56, and Spade could be the boy. The first phase of this scene will be built around staying on the same side of this 180° line.

Once laid out for us in the first two shots, the space is analyzed into its components. Shots 3 (8.61) and 4 (8.62) show Spade and Effie talking. Because the 180° line established at the outset is adhered to (each shot presents the two from the same side), we know their location and spatial relationships. In cutting together medium shots of the two, however, Huston relies on two other common tactics within the 180° system.

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**8.57 A Western shootout and the axis of action.**

**8.58 The Maltese Falcon: Shot 1a.**

**8.59 The Maltese Falcon: Shot 1b.**

**8.60 The Maltese Falcon: Shot 2.**

**8.61 The Maltese Falcon: Shot 3.**

**8.62 The Maltese Falcon: Shot 4.**
The first is the shot/reverse-shot pattern. Once the 180° line has been established, we can show that one end point of the line, then the other. Here we cut back and forth from Effie to Spade. A reverse shot is not literally the reverse of the first framing. It is simply a shot of the opposite end of the axis of action, usually showing a three-quarters view of the subject. In our bird's-eye view diagram (8.50), shots 2 and 3 form a shot/reverse-shot pattern at 9.61 and 8.62, respectively. Earlier examples in this chapter of shot/reverse-shot cutting are B.23, A.84, and B.25, A.26.

The second tactic Huston uses here is the eyeline match. That is, shot A presents someone looking at something offscreen; shot B shows us what is being looked at. In neither shot are character or object seen. In the Maltese Falcon opening, the cut from the shot of Effie (shot 3.861) to the shot of Spade at his desk (shot 4, 8.62) is an eyeline match. The shots from The Birds of Mabelle watching the bird attack and fire also create eyeline matches, as do the examples of editing balancing frame compositions (8.23, 8.24, and 8.25, A.26).

Note that shot/reverse-shot editing need not employ eyeline matches. You could film both ends of the axis in a shot/reverse-shot pattern without showing the characters looking at each other. One character might have his hands over his eyes, the other might have his back to her. (Note that in 8.62, Spade is not looking at Effie.) On the whole, however, most shot/reverse-shot cuts also utilize the eyeline match.

The eyeline match is a simple idea but a powerful one, since the directional quality of the eyeline creates a strong spatial continuity. To be looked at, an object must be near the looker. The eyeline match presumably created the effect Kolischow identified in his construction of false spaces through editing. That is, the expressionless actor seems to be looking at something in the next shot, and the audience assumes that the actor is reacting accordingly.

Within the 180° system, the eyeline match, like constant screen direction, can be fitted together to form a consistent narrative. Note how in shot 3, Effie's glance off screen reiterates Spade's position even though he is not on screen. And though Spade does not look up after the cut to shot 4, the camera position remains stationary on the same side of the axis of action (indeed, the position is virtually identical to that in shot 1b). We know that Effie is offscreen left. Thus the breakdown of the scene's space is completely consistent; the consistency is ensured by adherence to the 180° system. Thanks to the shot/reverse-shot pattern and the eyeline match, we understand the characters' movements even when they are not in the same frame.

The spatial consistency is reaffirmed in shot 5, which presents the same framing as did shot 2. The office is shown again (shot 5a, 8.63), with the new character, Brigid O'Shaughnessey, entering. Spade stands near the desk, and the camera reframes his movement by a slight tilt upward (shot 5b, 8.64). Shot 5 is a re-establishing shot, since it reestablishes the overall space that was analyzed into shots 3 and 4. The pattern, then, has been established/breakdown/reestablishment—one of the most common patterns of spatial editing in the classical continuity style.

Let us pause to examine how this pattern has functioned to advance the narrative. Shot 1 has suggested the locale and, more important, has emphasized the protagonist by linking him to the sign on the window. Offset sound and Spade's "Yes, sweetheart" just confirm the cut to shot 2. This establishing shot firmly anchors shot 1 spatially. It also introduces the source of the offcamera sound—the new character, Effie. The shot changes at precisely the moment when Effie enters. We use this unlikely to notice the cut, because our expectations lead us to wait for the next scene. The space near the door has been shown when the cause-effect chain makes it important, not before.

Shots 3 and 4 present a similar pattern. Behind the scene, Spade and Effie, and the shot/reverse shot and the eyeline match return us to the characters' locations. We may not even notice the cutting, since the style works to emphasize the dramatic flow of the scene—what Effie says and how Spade reacts. In shot 5, the overall view of the office is presented again, precisely at the moment when a new character enters the scene, and this in turn signals her presence in the space. Thus the narrative—the dialogue between characters—is furthered by adherence to the 180° system. The editing subordinates space to action.

We can trace the same procedures, with one additional variation, in the shots that follow. In shot 6, Brigid O'Shaughnessey enters Spade's office. Shot 6 presents a reverse angle on the two characters. In the Maltese Falcon, the 180° line ran between Spade and the doorway. Now the axis of action runs from Spade to the client's chair by his desk. Once established, this new line will not be violated.

The extra factor here is a third tactic for ensuring spatial continuity—the match on action, a very powerful device. Assume that a person starts to stand up in shot 1. We can wait until the character is standing up and has stopped moving before cutting or shot 2. We can instead show the person's movement beginning in shot 1 and then cut this point out of shot 2. This latter movement is shown on the information. The movement would then have a match on action, the editing device that carries a movement across the break between two shots.

To appreciate the skill involved in making a match on action, recall that most films are shot with a single camera. In filming shots whose action will be matched at the editing stage, it is possible that the first shot, in which the movement starts, will be filmed hours or days apart from the second, in which the movement is continued. Thus matching action is not simply a matter of cutting together two complete versions of the same scene from different vantage points. The process involves keeping notes about matters of camera work, mise-en-scene, and editing so that all the details can be fitted together in the assembly phase of production. In the Maltese Falcon scene, the scene, X, is shown from the beginning of shot 6 (8.65) uses a match on action, the action being Brigid's walk toward Spade's desk. Again, the 180° system aids in concealing the match, since it keeps screen direction consistent. Brigid moves from left to right in both shots. As one would expect, the match on action is a tool of narrative continuity. It takes a practiced eye to spot a smooth match on action; so powerful is our desire to follow the action flowing across the cut that we ignore the cut itself.

Except for the match on action, the editing in the rest of the scene uses the same tactics as we have already reviewed. When Brigid sits down, a new axis of action has been established (shot 6b, 8.66). This enables Huston to break down the space into closer shots (shots 7 through 13, 8.67–8.72). All of these shots use the shot/reverse-shot tactic. The camera frame, at an oblique angle, one end point of the 180° line, the frame of the other. (Note the shoulders in foreground of shots 7, 8, and 10; 8.67, 8.69, and 8.70.) Here again, the editing of space presents the dialogue action simply and unambiguously.

Beginning with shot 12, Huston's cuts also create eyeline matches. Spade looks off left at Brigid (shot 12, 8.72). She looks off left as the door is heard opening (shot 13, 8.73). Arcturus, just coming in, looks off right at him (shot 14, 8.74), and they both look off at him (shot 15, 8.75). The 180° rule permits us always to know who is looking at whom.

What is the function of the analytical cutting in this part of the scene? Huston could have played the entire conversation in one long take, remaining with shot 6b (8.65). Why has he broken the conversation into seven shots? Most evidently, the analytical breakdown controls our attention. We will look at Brigid or Spade at exactly the moment Huston wants us to. In the long take and the more distant framing, Huston would have had to channel our attention in other ways, perhaps through composition or sound.
Furthermore, the shot/reverse-shot pattern emphasizes the development of Brigid's story and Spade's reaction to it. As she gets into details, the cutting moves from over-the-shoulder shots (8.67, 8.68) to framings that isolate Brigid (8.69 and 8.71) and eventually one that isolates Spade (8.72). These shots come at the point when Brigid, in an artificially shy manner, tells her story, and the medium close-ups arouse our curiosity about whether she is telling the truth. The shot of Spade's reaction (8.72) suggests that he is skeptical. In short, the analytical editing cooperates with framing and figure behavior to focus our attention on Brigid's tale, to let us study her demeanor, and to get a hint as to Spade's response.

When Archer enters, the breakdown of the space steps for a moment, and Huston reestablishes the locale. Archer is integrated into the action by means of a rightward push shot (shots 16a and 16b, 8.76 and 8.77). His path is consistent with the scene's first axis of action, that running between Spade and the doorway. More-

over, the framing on him is similar to that used for Brigid's entrance earlier. (Compare shot 16b with 6a [8.77 and 8.65].) Such repetitions allow the viewer to concentrate on the new information, not the manner in which it is presented.

Now firmly established as part of the scene, Archer hitched himself up onto Spade's desk. His position puts him at Spade's end of the axis of action (shot 17, 8.78). The rest of the scene's editing analyzes this new set of relationships without ever crossing the 180° line.

The viewer is not supposed to notice all this. Throughout, the shots present space to emphasize the cause-effect flow—the characters' actions, entrances, dialogue, reactions. The editing has economically organized space to convey narrative continuity.

The continuity system, in exactly these terms, remains in force today. Most narrative films still draw on 180° principles (8.79, 8.80).

**Continuity Editing: Some Fine Points**

The continuity system can be refined in various ways. If a director arranges several characters in a circular pattern, say, sitting around a dinner table, then the axis of action will probably run between the characters of greatest importance at the moment. In 8.81 and 8.82, from Howard Hawk's *Bringing Up Baby*, the important interaction is occurring between two men, so we can cut from one side of the woman in the foreground to the other in order to get consistent shot/reverse shots. When one man leaves the table, however, a semicircular arrangement of figures in space is created, so that a new axis of action can be established between the two women. Now we can get shot/reverse-shot exchanges running down the length of the table (8.83, 8.84).

Both the *Maltese Falcon* and the *Bringing Up Baby* examples show that in the course of a scene the 180° line may shift as the characters move around the setting.

In some cases, the filmmaker may create a new axis of action that allows the camera to take up a position that would have been across the line in an earlier phase of the scene.

A simple example occurs in Georges Franju's *Eyes without a Face*. The daughter, who wears a mask to hide her disfigured face, is talking with her father's housekeeper. The housekeeper is shown in an over-the-shoulder medium shot, with the axis of action running from the right foreground to the left middle ground (8.85). If Franju wanted us to see the daughter's reaction, the continuity rules would oblige him to take a shot over the housekeeper's right shoulder, showing the daughter facing leftward. Instead, the housekeeper moves rightward into depth, the camera panning to keep her in the frame (8.86). From the right rear she turns to look leftward...
at the daughter (8.87). This creates an axis of action running from the foreground left to the background right. Now Franja gives us a three-quarter reverse shot of the young woman looking rightward (8.88). Had Franja cut from the first camera position (8.85) to this position, he would have violated the original axis of action. (This would essentially present as with shot X in 8.56.) The housekeeper’s move to the right created a new axis that made this angle and eyeline permissible.

Alternatively, even if the actors remain in place, the filmmaker can create a new axis by tracking the camera across the line. Going back to our bird’s-eye view in 8.56, suppose that shot 2, showing the boy, continued while the camera circled the couple clockwise and ended up in the shaded area, still facing him but now angled over the girl’s left shoulder. Then a new 180° line would be set up, showing the boy looking screen right. And now shot X, showing the girl looking left, would be in correct continuity. The camera movement would have established a new axis of action.

The power of the axis of action and the eyelines it can create is so great that the filmmaker may be able to eliminate an establishing shot, thus relying on the Kuleshov effect. In Spike Lee’s *She’s Gotta Have It*, Nola Darling holds a Thanksgiving dinner for her three male friends. Lee never presents a shot showing all four in the same frame. Instead he uses medium long shots including all the men (for example, 8.89), over-the-shoulder shot/reverse shots among them (for example, 8.90), and eyelined matched medium close-ups of them. Nola is given her own medium close-ups (Fig. 8.91).

Through eyelines and body orientations, the editing keeps the spatial relations completely consistent. For example, each man looks in a different direction when addressing Nola (8.92, 8.93). This cutting pattern enhances the dramatic action by making all the men equal competitors for her. They are clustered at one end of the table, and none is shown in the same frame with her. In addition, by organizing the angles around her overall orientation to the action (as in 8.94), Lee reinforces Nola as the pivotal character. Further, the longer shot and her separate medium close-ups intensify the progression of the scene. The men are on display, and Nola is coolly judging each one’s behavior.

Another felicity in the 180° system is the cheat cut. Sometimes a director may not have perfect continuity from shot to shot because he or she has composed each shot for specific reasons. Must the two shots match perfectly? Again, narrative motivation decides the matter. Given that the 180° system emphasizes narrative causality, the director has some freedom to “cheat” mise-en-scene from shot to shot—that is, to mismatch slightly the positions of characters or objects.

Consider two shots from William Wyler’s *Jezebel*. Neither character moves during either shot, but Wyler has blatantly cheated the position of Julie (8.95, 8.96). Yet most viewers would not notice the discrepancy since it is the dialogue that is of paramount importance in the scene; here again, the similarities between shots outweigh the differences of position. Moreover, a change from a straight-on angle to a slightly high angle helps hide the cheat. There is, in fact, a cheat in the *Maltese Falcon* scene, too, between shots 6b and 7. In 6b (8.86), as Spade leans forward,
the back of his chair is not near him. Yet in shot 7 (8.67), it has been cheated to be just behind his left arm. Here again, the primacy of the narrative flow overrides such a cheat cut.

One more line point in spatial continuity is particularly relevant to a film's narration. We have already seen that a camera framing can strongly suggest a character's optical point of view, as in our earlier example from Fury (7.118, 7.119). That example depends on a cut from the person looking (7.118) to what he sees (7.119). We have also seen an instance of POV cutting in the Birds sequence discussed on pp. 295–296. Now we are in a position to see how optical POV is consistent with continuity editing, creating a variety of eyeline-match editing known as point-of-view cutting.

Consider Alfred Hitchcock's Rear Window, which is built around the situation of the solitary photographer Jeff watching events taking place in an apartment across the courtyard. Hitchcock uses a standard eyeline-match pattern, cutting from a shot of Jeff looking (8.97) to a shot of what he sees (8.98). Since there is no establishing shot that shows both Jeff and the opposite apartment, the Kuleshov effect operates here: Our mind connects the two images. More specifically, the second shot represents Jeff's optical viewpoint, and this is filmed from a position on his end of the axis of action (8.99). We are strongly restricted to what Jeff sees and what (he thinks) he knows.

As Rear Window goes on, the subjectivity of the POV shots intensifies. Becoming more eager to examine the details of his neighbor's life, Jeff begins to use binoculars and a photographic telephoto lens to magnify his view. By using shots taken with lenses of different focal lengths, Hitchcock can show how each new tool enlarges what Jeff can see (8.100–8.103). Hitchcock's cutting adheres to spatial continuity rules and exploits their POV possibilities in order to arouse curiosity and suspense.

More Refinements: Crossing the Axis of Action

Most continuity-based filmmakers prefer not to cut across the axis of action. They would rather move the actors around the setting and create a new axis, as in our example from Eyes without a Face (8.85–8.88). Still, can you ever legitimately cut across an established axis of action? Yes, sometimes. A scene occurring in a doorway, on a staircase, or in other symmetrical settings may occasionally break the line. Another way to get across the center line is to cut away to a character who is offscreen. By then moving that character up to the main action, perhaps following the character with a camera movement, the filmmakers can establish a different axis of action.

Sometimes too the filmmakers can get across the axis by taking one shot on the line itself and using it as a transition. This strategy is rare in dialogue sequences, but
"I saw David Lynch and asked him, 'What's this about crossing the axis?' He burst out laughing and said, 'That always gets me.' And I asked, 'But you can't do anything. You're a director.' Then he paused and said, 'But it doesn't cut together.'"

— Stephen King, novelist, on directing his first film, Maximum Overdrive

It can be seen in chase and outdoor action. By filming on the axis, the filmmaker presents the action as moving directly toward the camera (a head-on shot) or away from it (a tail-on shot). The climactic chase of *The Road Warrior* offers several examples. As marauding road gangs try to board a fleeing gasoline truck, George Miller uses many head-on and tail-on shots of the vehicles (8.104 to 8.108).

Also, we should note that continuity-based films occasionally violate screen direction without confusing the viewer. This usually occurs when the scene's action is very well defined. For example, during a chase in *John Ford's Stagecoach*, there is no ambiguity about the Ringo Kid's leap from the coach to the horses (8.109; 8.110). We would not be likely to assume that the coach had turned around suddenly, as in the possible misinterpretation of the shootout scene with the two cowboys (8.57).

**Crosscutting**

Continuity editing illustrates how editing can endow the film's narrative with great range of knowledge. A cut can take us to any point on the correct side of the axis of action. Editing can even create omniscience, that godlike knowledge that some films seek to present. The outstanding technical device here is crosscutting, first extensively explored by D. W. Griffith in his last-minute rescue scene in *The Battle at Elderbush Gulch*, a cavalry troop is riding to rescue some settlers trapped in a cabin and battling the Indians outside (8.111–8.114). After 11 additional shots of the cavalry, various parts of the cabin interior, and the Indians outdoors, a 12th shot shows the cavalry riding in from the distance behind the cabin.

8.104 Near the climax of the chase in *The Road Warrior*, Max is driving left to right along the road...

8.105 ... and then he is still driving toward the right. An attacking thug perched on the front of the truck turns and looks off right in horror...

8.106 ... realizing that another vehicle, moving right to left, is coming toward them on a collision course.
Crosscutting gives us an unrestricted knowledge of causal, temporal, or spatial information by alternating shots from one line of action in one place with shots of other events in other places. Crosscutting thus creates some spatial discontinuity, but it binds the action together by creating a sense of cause and effect and temporal simultaneity. In _Jerry Maguire_, for example, crosscutting interweaves the action of sports agent Jerry and his rival racing to sign up the same clients (8.115–8.118).

Fritz Lang's _M_ goes further, intercutting these lines of action. While the police seek the child murderer, gangsters prowl the streets looking for him as well, and we also occasionally see the murderer himself. Crosscutting ties together the different lines of action, bringing out a temporal simultaneity and the causal process of the pursuit. The crosscutting also gives us a range of knowledge greater than that of any one character. We know that the gangsters are after the murderer, but the police and the murderer do not. Crosscutting also builds up suspense, as we form expectations that are only gradually clarified and fulfilled. It may also create parallels, and Lang exploits this possibility by suggesting analogies between the police and the crooks. Whatever other functions it may have, though, crosscutting remains primarily a means of presenting narrative actions that are occurring in several locales at roughly the same time.

The devices of spatial continuity show how film technique draws the spectator into an active process. We assume that setting, character movement, and character position will be consistent and coherent. Our prior knowledge of filmic conventions tells us from strong expectations about what shot will follow the one we are seeing. We also make inferences on the basis of cues, so that when Brigid and Spade look off left we infer that someone is entering the room and we expect to see a shot of that person.
What makes the continuity system invisible is its ability to draw on a range of skills that we have learned so well that they seem automatic. This makes spatial continuity editing a powerful tool for the filmmaker who wishes to reinforce habitual expectations. In recent decades, Hollywood filmmakers have developed ways to make traditional continuity techniques more forceful. (See Box.) Because continuity editing has been so widely used for so long, it also becomes a central target for the filmmaker who wants to use film style to challenge or change our normal viewing activities.

**Temporal Continuity: Order, Frequency, Duration**

In the classical continuity system, time, like space, is organized according to the development of the narrative. We know that the plot's presentation of the story typically involves manipulation of time. Continuity editing seeks to support and sustain this temporal manipulation.

To get specific, recall our distinction among temporal order, frequency, and duration. Continuity editing typically presents the story events in a 1-2-3 order (for example, Spade rolls a cigarette, then Effie comes in, then he answers her, and so on). The most common violation of this order is a flashback, signaled by a cut or dissolve.

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**Intensified Continuity: L.A. Confidential and Contemporary Editing**

By the 1990s, the continuity system was the standard approach to editing in most of the world's commercial filmmaking. But it underwent changes over the years. Today's editing practices abide by the principles of continuity but amplify them in certain ways.

Most obviously, mainstream films are now cut much faster than in the period between 1930 and 1960. Then, a film typically consisted of 300-500 shots, but in the years after 1960, the cutting pace picked up. Today an average film might have over 1200 shots, and action films routinely contain 2000, 3000, or more. (Armageddon contains over 3700.) Partly because of the faster editing, scenes are built out of relatively close views of individual characters, rather than long-shot framings. Establishing shots tend to be less common, sometimes appearing only at the end of a scene. Telephoto lenses, which enlarge faces, help achieve tight framings, and modern widescreen formats allow two or more facial close-ups to occupy the screen. Also, the camera tends to move very frequently, picking out one detail after another.

The accompanying shots from *L.A. Confidential* show several of these tendencies at work. After arresting three black suspects, Lieutenant Ed Exley prepares to wring a confession from them. The scene takes less than a minute but employs nine shots, two with significant camera movement. (The film contains nearly 2000 shots, an average of four seconds each.) Director Curtis Hanson shifts the emphasis among several key characters by coordinating his editing with anamorphic widescreen, staging in depth, close-ups and medium close-ups, rack-focus, and mobile framing (8.119-8.130). Interestingly, the actors make no expressive use of their hands or bodies; the performances are almost completely facial.

Why did this intensified form of continuity become so common? Some historians trace it to the influence of television. Movies were broadcast by TV networks in the 1960s, transmitted by cable and satellite in the 1970s, and available on home video in the 1980s and 1990s. As people saw movies on home screens rather than in theaters, filmmakers reshaped their techniques.
8.120 Shot 2: A match on Exley's action of turning gives us a fuller view of the policemen and establishes two other main characters: Jack Vincennes on the left, Bud White in the background, watching. This is only a partial establishing shot; a later camera movement will acquaint us with the layout of the interrogation room.

8.121 Shot 3: Haskin underscores White's presence by cutting to a telephoto shot of him saying that the suspects killed his partner.

8.122 Shot 4: In an echo of the opening framing, Exley now stands at the second interrogation room, with another reflection. The shot also reinforces Vincennes's presence, which will provide an important reaction later.

8.123 The camera tracks with Exley moving right to study the suspect in the third room. White's reflection can be seen in frame center. The camera movement has linked the three main detectives on the case while also establishing the three rooms as being side by side. At the end of the camera movement, Exley turns, and...
Furthermore, classical editing also often presents only once what happens once in the story, in continuity style, it would be a gross mistake for Huston to repeat the shot of, say, Brigid sitting down (8.66). Again, though, flashbacks are the most common way of motivating the repetition of a scene already witnessed. So chronological sequence and one-for-one frequency are the standard methods of handling order and frequency within the continuity style of editing. There are occasional exceptions, as we saw in our examples from The Godfather, Do the Right Thing and Police Story (pp. 306, 309–310).

What of duration? In the classical continuity system, story duration is seldom expanded; that is, screen time is seldom made greater than story time. Usually, duration is in complete continuity (plot time equaling story time) or is elided (story time being greater than plot time). Let us first consider complete continuity, the most common possibility. Here a scene occupying five minutes in the story also occupies five minutes when projected on the screen.
The first scene of *The Maltese Falcon* displays three uses for temporal continuity. First, the narrative progression of the scene has no gaps. Every movement by the characters and every line of dialogue is presented. Second, there is the soundtrack. Second, there is the sound track. Sound issuing from the story space (what we call diegetic sound) is a standard indicator of temporal continuity, especially when, as in this scene, the sound bleeds over between cuts. Third, there is the match on action between shots 5 and 6. So powerful is the match on action that it creates both spatial and temporal continuity. The reason is obvious. If an action carries across the cut, the space and time are assumed to be continuous from shot to shot. In all, an absence of ellipses in the story action, diatonic sound overlapping the cuts, and matching an action are three primary indicators that the duration of the scene is continuous.

Sometimes, however, a second possibility will be explored: temporal ellipsis. The ellipsis may, of course, occur seconds, minutes, hours, days, years, or centuries. Some ellipses are of no importance to the narrative development and are concealed. To take a common example: a classical narrative film typically does not show the entire time it takes to character to dress, wash, and breakfast in the morning. Shots of the character going into the shower, putting on shoes, or frying an egg might be edited so as to eliminate the unwanted bits of time, with the plot presenting in seconds a process that might have taken an hour in the story. As we saw on p. 308, optical punctuation, empty frames, and cutaways are frequently used to cover short temporal ellipses.

But other ellipses are important to the narrative. The viewer must recognize that time has passed. For this task the continuity style has built up a varied repertoire of devices. Often, dissolves, fades, or wipes are used to indicate an ellipsis between shots. Thus from the last shot of one scene we dissolve, fade, or wipe to the first shot of the next scene. (The Hollywood rule is that a dissolve indicates a brief time lapse and a fade indicates a much longer one.) In many narrative filmmakers use a cut for such transitions. For example, in *A Quiet Man* directly from a scene in the air to a space station orbiting the earth, one of the boldest graphic matches in narrative cinema. The cut eliminates millions of years of story time.

In other cases it is necessary to show a large-scale process or a lengthy period—a city waking up in the morning, a war, a child growing up, the rise of a singing star. Here classical continuity uses another device for temporal ellipsis: the montage sequence. (This should not be confused with the concept of montage in Sergei Eisenstein’s film theory.) Brief portions of a process, if a gangster’s rise (for example, “1865” or “San Francisco”), stereotyped images (such as the Eiffel Tower), newspaper footage, newspaper headlines, and the like, can be swiftly joined by dissolves and music to compress a lengthy series of actions into a few moments.

We are all familiar with the most clichéd montage sequences—calendar leaves fluttering away, newspaper pages churning out an extra, clocks ticking portentously—but in the hands of deft editors such sequences become small virtuoso pieces in themselves. Stanley Kubrick’s montages of American life in *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington*, Jack Kilmer’s tracing of a society across two decades in *The Roaring Twenties*, and Edward Curtiss’s brutal depictions of a gangster’s rise in *Scarface* illustrate the power of the device. The montage sequence is still used in Hollywood films, though it tends to be more restrained stylistically than in the 1930s and 1940s. *Java*, for example, simply uses a series of unattached shots of vacationers arriving at the beach to indicate a time shift to the beginning of the tourist season. Music is still used as an accompaniment, however, even when it accompanies a series of magazine covers in a scene from *Tootsie* that traces the hero’s rise to success as a soap-opera star. A montage sequence in *The Silence of the Lambs* presents brief shots of Clarice Starling training at the FBI academy and researching Hannibal Lecter’s past.

Thus, the continuity style uses the temporal dimension of editing primarily for narrative purposes. Through prior knowledge, the spectator expects the editing to present story events in a chronological order, with only occasional rearrangement through flashbacks. The viewer expects that editing will respect the frequency of story events. And the viewer assumes that actions irrelevant to story causality will be omitted or at least abridged by judicious ellipses.

At least, this is how the classical Hollywood continuity system has treated storytelling. Like graphics, rhythm, and space, time is organized to permit the unfolding of cause and effect, the arousal of curiosity, suspense, and surprise. But there are many alternatives to the continuity style of editing, and these are worth a look.

**ALTERNATIVES TO CONTINUITY EDITING**

**Graphic and Rhythmic Possibilities**

Powerful and pervasive as it is, the continuity style remains only one style, and many filmmakers have explored other editing possibilities.

Films using abstract or associational form have frequently granted the graphic and rhythmic dimensions of editing great weight. Instead of joining shot 1 to shot 2 primarily on the basis of the spatial and temporal functions that the shot fulfills in presenting a story, you could join them on the basis of purely graphic or rhythmic qualities—independent of the time and space they represent. In films such as *An American in Paris*, *Scenes from Under Childhood*, and *Western History*, experimentalist Slim Braden uses purely graphic means of joining shot to shot: Continuities and discontinuities of light, texture, and shape motivate the editing. Similarly, parts of Bruce Conner’s *Cosmic Ray*, *A Movie*, and *Report* cut together worn-out footage, old film clips, leader, and black frames on the basis of graphic patterns of movement, direction, and speed.

Many non-narrative films have completely subordinated the space and time presented in each shot to the rhythmic relations among shots. Short-frame films (in which each shot is only one frame long) are the most extreme examples of this overriding rhythmic concern. Two famous examples are Robert Breer’s *Dirt Fight* (5.31) and Peter Kubelka’s *Schwabacher*.

The prominence of graphic and rhythmic editing in non-narrative cinema is not, however, as recent a phenomenon as these examples might suggest. As early as 1913, some painters were contemplating the pure-design possibilities offered by film, and many works of the European avant-garde movements of the 1920s combined an interest in abstract graphics with a desire to explore rhythmic editing. Perhaps the most famous of these is the Fernand Léger-Dudley Murphy film *Ballet mécanique* (see Chapter 5, pp. 150–155). In Chapter 10 we shall see how *Ballet mécanique* juxtaposes its shots on the basis of graphic and rhythmic qualities.

Important to the graphic and rhythmic possibilities of editing have been the non-narrative cinema’s powers have not been wholly neglected in the story film. Although the continuity style seeks an overall graphic continuity, this is usually subordinated to a concern with mapping narrative space and tracing narrative time. Some narrative filmmakers, however, occasionally subordinate narrative concerns to graphic pattern. The most famous examples are probably the films for which Bushy Berkeley choreographed elaborate dance numbers. In *42nd Street*,...
Gold Diggers of 1933, Footlight Parade, Gold Diggers of 1935, and Dance, the narrative periodically grinds to a halt and the film presents intricate dances that are arranged, shot, and edited with a concern for the pure configuration of dancers and background (6.143, from *42nd Street*).

More complexly related to the narrative is the graphic editing of Yasujirō Ozu. Ozu's cutting is often dictated by a much more precise graphic continuity than we find in the classical continuity style. In two scenes from *An Autumn Afternoon*, Ozu creates graphic matches on men sitting opposite each other in restaurants (8.131–8.134). In *Tokyo Story*, Ozu uses color for the same purpose, cutting from laundry on a line to a domestic interior and matching on a red lamp in the upper left of each shot (8.135, 8.136).

Some narrative films have momentarily subordinated spatial and temporal editing factors to rhythmic ones. In the 1920s both the French Impressionist school and the Soviet avant-garde frequently made story progression secondary to purely rhythmic editing. In such films as Abel Gance's *La Roue*, Jean Epstein's *Corneille* and *Le Crime à trois faces*, and Ivan Mosjoukine's *Keat*, accelerated editing renders the tempo of an unrelenting train, a whirling carousel, a racing automobile, and a drunken dance. In Epstein's *Fall of the House of Usher* a poetic sequence of Usher strumming a guitar and singing organizes the length of the shots in accord with a songlike pattern of verse and refrain. Kuleshov's *The Death Ray* and, as we shall see, Eisenstein's *October* occasionally make rhythm dominate narrative space and time. More rarely, we can find strong passages of rhythmic editing in the Busby Berkeley musicals, Rouben Mamoulian's *Love Me Tonight*, René Clair's *Le Million*, and several films of Ozu and Hitchcock, as well as in *Assault on Precinct 13* and *The Terminator*. Pulsating rhythmic editing is prominent in films influenced by music videos, such as *The Crow* and *Romeo + Juliet*. As we saw with graphics, rhythmic editing may override the spatial and temporal dimensions; when this happens, narrative becomes proportionately less important.

Spatial and Temporal Discontinuity

Non-narrative films may sometimes avoid using the continuity style, but what about narrative alternatives? How can one tell a story without adhering to the continuity rules? Let us sample some ways particular filmmakers have created distinct editing styles by use of what might be considered spatial and temporal discontinuities.

One option is to use spatial continuity in ambiguous ways. In *Mon Oncle d'Amérique*, Renoir intercuts the stories of his three main characters with shots of each character's favorite star, taken from French films of the 1940s. At one point, as Renoir's key office mate calls to him, we get the cowoker in one shot (8.137), but Renoir cuts to a shot of Jean Gabin in an older film, turning to him in reverse shot (8.138). Only then does Renoir supply a shot of Renoir turning to meet his questioner (8.139). The film does not define precisely where the Gabin shot is a fantasy image; we cannot tell whether Renoir imagines himself as his star confronting his coworker, or whether the film's narrative draws the comparison independent of Renoir's state of mind. The cut relies on the cues of shot/reverse shot bra to them to create a momentarily jarring discontinuity that triggers narrative ambiguity.

More drastically, a filmmaker could violate or ignore the 180° system. The editing choices of filmmakers Jacques Tati and Yasujirō Ozu are based on what we might call 360° space. Instead of an axis of action that dictates that the camera be placed within an imaginary semicircle, these filmmakers work as if the action were not a line but a point at the center of a circle and as if the camera could be placed at any point on the circumference. In *Mr. Hulot's Holiday*, *Play Time*, and *Traffic*, Tati systematically films from almost every side; edited together, the shots present multiple spatial perspectives on a single event. Similarly, Ozu's scenes construct a 360° space that produces what the continuity style would consider grave editing errors. Ozu's films often do not yield consistent relative positions and screen directions; the eye-line matches are out of joint and the only consistency is the violation of the 180° line. One of the greatest sins in the classical continuity style is to match on action while breaking the line, yet Ozu does this comfortably in *Early Summer* (8.140), (8.141). (See Chapter 11 for a discussion of space and time in Ozu's *Tokyo Story*).

Such spatially discontinuous cutting affects the spectator's experience as well. The defender of classical editing would claim that spatial continuity rules are necessary for the clear presentation of a narrative. But anyone who has seen a film by Ozu or Tati can testify that no narrative confusion arises from their continuity violations. Though the spaces do not flow as smoothly as in the Hollywood style (this is indeed part of the films' fascination), the cause-effect chains remain intelligible. The inescapable conclusion is that the continuity system is only one way to tell a story. Historically, this system has been the dominant one, but aesthetically it has no priority over other styles.

There are two other notable devices of discontinuity. In *Breathless*, Jean-Luc Godard violates conventions of spatial, temporal, and graphic continuity by his systematic use of the jump cut. Though this term is often loosely used, its primary meaning is this: When two shots of the same subject are cut together but are not sufficiently different in camera distance and angle, there will be a noticeable jump...
8.140 In Early Summer, Ora cuts on the grandfather's gesture of drinking...

8.141 ...directly to the opposite side of the characters.

on the screen. Classical continuity avoids such jumps by generous use of shot/reverse shot and by the 30° rule (advising that every camera position be varied by at least 30° from the previous one). But an examination of shots from Breathless suggests the consequences of Godard's jump cuts (8.142, 8.143). Far from flowing unnoticed, such cuts are very visible, and they disorient the spectator.

A second violation of continuity is created by the non-diegetic insert. Here the filmmaker cuts from the scene to a metaphorical or symbolic shot that is not part of the space and time of the narrative. Cliches abound here (8.144, 8.145). More complex examples occur in the films of Eisenstein and Godard. In Eisenstein's Strike the massacre of workers is intercut with the slaughter of a bull. In Godard's La Chinoise, Henri tells an anecdote about the ancient Egyptians who, he claims, thought that their language was the language of the gods. As he says this (8.146), Godard cuts in two close-ups of relics from the tomb of King Tutankhamen (8.147, 8.148). As non-diegetic inserts, coming from outside the story world, these shots construct a running, often ironic, commentary on the action, and they prompt the spectator to search for implicit meanings. (Do the relics corroborate or challenge what Henri says?)

Though both the jump cut and the non-diegetic insert can be used in a narrative context (as in the Fury example), they tend to weaken narrative continuity. The jump cut interrupts the story with abrupt gaps, while the non-diegetic insert suspends story action altogether. It is no accident that both devices have been prominently used by the contemporary filmmaker most associated with the challenge to classical narrative, Jean-Luc Godard. In Chapter 11 we shall examine the nature of this challenge by analyzing Breathless.

There are still other alternatives to classical continuity, especially in the temporal dimension. Although the classical approach to order and frequency of story events seems the best option, it is only the most familiar. Story events do not have to be edited in 1-2-3 order. In Renoir's La Guerre est finie, scenes cut in conventional continuity are interrupted by images that may represent flashbacks, or fantasy episodes, or even future events. Editing can also play with variable frequency for narrative purposes; the same event can be shown repeatedly. In La Guerre est finie, the same funeral is depicted in different hypothetical ways (the protagonist is present, or he is not).

Again, Godard offers a striking example of how editing can manipulate both order and frequency. In Pierrot le fou, as Marianne and Ferdinand leave her apartment fleeing gangsters, Godard scambles the order of the shots (8.149–8.152). Godard also plays with frequency by repeating one gesture—Ferdinand jumping into the car—but showing it differently each time. Such manipulation of editing blocks our normal expectations about story and forces us to concentrate on the very process of piecing together the film's narrative action.

8.146 A diegetic shot in La Chinoise is followed by...

8.147 ...non-diegetic shot of the lion bed of King Tutankhamen...

8.148 ...and his golden mask.

8.149 Pierrot le fou: Initially Ferdinand jumps into the car as Marianne pulls away...
The editing may also take liberties with story duration. Although complete continuity and ellipses are the most common ways of rendering duration, expansion—stretching a moment out, making screen time greater than story time—remains a distinct possibility. Tuffinet uses such expansions in *Jules and Jim* to underscore narrative turning points (Catherine lifting her veil or jumping off a bridge). In Chabrol's *La Femme infidèle*, when the outraged husband strikes his wife's lover with a statue, Chabrol overlaps shots of the victim falling to the floor.

Filmmakers have found creative ways to rework the most basic elements of the continuity system. We have indicated, for example, that a match on action strongly suggests that time continues across the cut. Yet Alain Resnais creates an impossible continuous action in *Last Year at Marienbad*. Small groups of guests are standing around the hotel lobby; one medium shot frames a blonde woman beginning to turn away from the camera (8.153). In the middle of her turn, there is a cut to her still turning but in a different setting (8.154). The smooth match on action, along with the woman's graphically matched position in the frame, imply that she is moving continuously, yet the change of setting contradicts this impression. In Chapter 5, we saw how Dassin's *Choreography for Camera* cuts together two shots of a dancer's leap; as in *Marienbad*, we have a match on action—yet in two different locales (5.29, 5.30).

Our examples indicate that certain discontinuities of temporal order, duration, and frequency can become perfectly intelligible in a narrative context. On the other hand, with the jump cut, the nondiegetic insert, and the inconsistent match on action, such temporal dislocations can also push away from traditional notions of story altogether and create ambiguous relations among shots.

As an example of the power of spatial and temporal discontinuities in editing, we shall look at a single example: Sergei Eisenstein's *October*.

**Functions of Discontinuity Editing: October**

For many Soviet filmmakers of the 1920s, editing was a major means of organizing the entire form of the film; it did not simply serve the narrative progression, as in the continuity system. Eisenstein's early films—*Strike*, *Potemkin*, *October*, and *Old and New*—all constitute attempts to build a film on the basis of certain editing devices. Rather than subordinate his editing patterns to the mapping out of a story, Eisenstein conceives of these films as editing constructions.
Eisenstein deliberately opposed himself to continuity editing, seeking out and exploiting what Hollywood would consider discontinuities. He staged, shot, and cut his films for the maximum collision from shot to shot, sequence to sequence, since he believed that only through being forced to synthesize such conflicts could the viewer participate actively understanding the film.

To this end, Eisenstein wrote his film by a juxtaposition of shots. No longer bound by conventional dramaturgy, Eisenstein’s films roam freely through time and space to construct an intricate pattern of images calculated to stimulate the viewer’s sensorium, emotions, and thinking. He dreamed of filming Marx’s Capital, of writing an essay by means of film editing. Needless to say, the intricacy of Eisenstein’s editing cannot be wholly conveyed here; a single sequence of an Eisenstein film could take up a chapter. Let us, however, briefly indicate how Eisenstein uses editing discontinuities in a short sequence from October.

The sequence is the third one in the film (and comprises no fewer than 125 shots). The story action is simple. The bourgeois Provisional Government has taken power in Russia after the February Revolution, but instead of withdrawing from World War I, the government has continued to support the Allies. This maneuver has left the Russian people no better off than under the czar. Now, in classical Hollywood cinema, this story might be shown through a montage sequence of newspaper headlines smoothly linked to a scene wherein a protagonist complains that the Provisional Government has not changed a thing. October’s protagonist, though, is not a person but the entire Russian people, and the film does not usually use dialogue scenes to present its story points. Rather, October seeks to go beyond a simple presentation of story events by making the audience actively interpret those events. To this end, the film confronts the audience with a disorienting and disjunctive set of images.

The sequence begins with shots showing the Russian soldiers on the front casting down their rifles and reorienting freely with German soldiers (8.155). Eisenstein then cuts back to the Provisional Government, where a flunky extends a document to an unseen ruler (8.156); this document pledges the government to aid the Allies. The soldiers’ reorientation is suddenly disrupted by a bombardment (8.157). The soldiers run back to the trenches and huddle as dirt and bomb fragments rain down on them. Eisenstein then cuts to a series of shots of a cannon being lowered off a factory assembly line. For a time the narrative crosscuts these images with the soldiers on the battlefield (8.158, 8.159). In the last section of the sequence, the shots of the cannon are crosscut with hungry women and children standing in breadlines in the snow (8.160). The sequence ends with two intertitles: “All as before . . .” / “Hunger and war.”

Graphically, there are some continuities and many strong discontinuities. When the soldiers fraternize, many shots closely resemble one another graphically, and one shot of a bursting bomb is graphically matched to its movement with many bustling into a trench. But the graphic discontinuities are more noteworthy. Eisenstein cuts from a laughing German soldier facing right to a menacing eagle statue, facing left, at the government headquarters (8.161, 8.162). There is a held jump cut. The flunky is bowing; then suddenly he is standing up (8.163, 8.164). A static shot of rifles being into the snow cuts to a long shot of a bursting shell (8.165, 8.166). When the soldiers race back to the trenches, Eisenstein often
opposes their direction of movement from shot to shot. Moreover, the cutting contrasts shots of the cannon slowly descending with shots of the men crouching in the trenches looking upward (8.158, 8.159). In the last phase of the sequence, Eisenstein juxtaposes the misty, almost completely static shots of the women and children with the sharply defined, dynamically moving shots of factory workers lowering the cannon. Such graphic discontinuities occur throughout the film, especially in scenes of dynamic action, and stimulate perceptual conflict in the audience. To watch an Eisenstein film is to submit oneself to such persuasive, pulsating graphic editing.

Eisenstein also makes vigorous use of temporal discontinuities. The sequence as a whole is opposed to Hollywood rules in its refusal to present the order of events unambiguously. Does the crosscutting of battlefield and government, factory and street indicate simultaneous action? (Consider, for example, that the women and children are seen at night, whereas the factory appears to be working in the daytime.) It is impossible to say if the battlefield events take place before or after or during the women’s vigil. Eisenstein has sacrificed the delineation of 1-2-3 order so that he can present the shots as emotional and conceptual units.

Duration is likewise variable. The soldiers fraternize in fairly continuous time, but the Provisional Government’s behavior presents drastic ellipses; this permits Eisenstein to identify the government as the unseen cause of the bombardment that raptures the peace. At one point, Eisenstein uses one of his favorite devices, a temporal expansion: There is an overlying cut as a soldier drinks from a bottle. Recall the expanded sequence of the wheel knocking over the foreman in Strike (8.50–8.52). At another point, the gradual collapse of the women and children waiting in line is elided. We see them standing, then later lying on the ground. Even frequency is made discontinuous: It is difficult to say if we are seeing several cannons lowered off the assembly line and only one descending cannon shown several times. Again, Eisenstein seeks a specific juxtaposition of elements, not obedience to a timeline. Editing’s manipulation of order, duration, and frequency subordinates straightforward story time to specific logical relationships. Eisenstein creates these relationships by juxtaposing disparate lines of action through editing.

Spatially, the October sequence runs from rough continuity to extreme discontinuity. Although at times the 180° rule is respected (especially in the shots of women and children), never does Eisenstein begin a section with an establishing shot. Reestablishing shots are rare, and rarely are the major components of the locales shown together in one shot.

Throughout, the classical continuity of space is broken by the intercutting of the different locales. To what end? By violating space in this manner, the film invites us to make emotional and conceptual connections. For example, crosscutting to the Provisional Government makes it the source of bombardment, a meaning reinforced by the way the first explosions are followed by the jump cut of the government flanking.

More daringly, by cutting from the crouching soldiers to a descending cannon, Eisenstein powerfully depicts the men being crushed by the warmaking apparatus of the government. This is reinforced by a false eyeline throughout the film, especially at the lowering cannon—false because of course the two elements are in entirely separate settings (8.158, 8.159). By then showing the factory workers lowering the cannon (8.167), the cutting links the oppressed soldiers to the oppressed proletariat. Finally, as the cannon hits the ground, Eisenstein crosscuts images of it with the shots of the starving families of the soldiers and the workers.

They too are shown as crushed by the government machine. As the cannon wheels come slowly to the floor, we cut to the women’s feet in the snow, and the machine’s heftiness is linked by titles ("one pound," "half a pound") to the steady starvation of the women and children. Although all of the spaces are in the story, such discontinuities make the film’s plot a running political commentary on the story events.

In all, then, Eisenstein’s spatial editing, like his temporal and graphic editing, constructs correspondences, analogies, and contrasts that interpret the story events. The interpretation is not simply handed to the viewer; rather, the editing discontinuities force the viewer to work out implicit meanings. This sequence, like others in October, demonstrates that there are powerful alternatives to the principles of classical continuity.

**SUMMARY**

When any two shots are joined, we can ask several questions:

1. **How are the shots graphically continuous or discontinuous?**
2. **What rhythmic relations are created?**
3. **Are the shots spatially continuous? If not, what creates the discontinuity?**
   (Crosscutting? Ambiguous cuts?) If the shots are spatially continuous, how does the 180° system create the continuity?
4. **Are the shots temporally continuous? If so, what creates the continuity?**
   (For example, matches on action?) If not, what creates the discontinuity? (Ellipses? Overlapping cuts?)

More generally, we can ask the question we ask of every film technique. How does this technique function with respect to the film’s narrative or non-narrative form? Does the film use editing to lay out the narrative space, time, and cause-effect chain in the manner of classical continuity? Or does the film use other editing patterns that enter into a different interplay with the narrative? If the film is not a narrative one, how does editing function to engender our formal expectations?

Some practical hints: You can learn to notice editing in several ways. If you are having trouble noticing cuts, try watching a film or television show and tapping with a pencil each time a shot changes. Once you recognize editing easily, watch any film with the sole purpose of observing one editing aspect—say, the way space is presented or the control of graphics or time. Sensitize yourself to rhythmic editing by noting cutting rates; tapping out the tempo of the cuts can help. Watching 1930s and 1940s American films can introduce you to classical continuity style; try to predict what shot will come next in a sequence. (You will be surprised at how often you are right.) When you watch a film on video, try turning off the sound; editing patterns become more apparent this way. When there is a violation of continuity, ask yourself whether it is accidental or serves a purpose. When you see a film that does not obey classical continuity principles, search for its unique editing patterns. Use the slow-motion, freeze, and reverse controls on a videocassette machine or DVD player to analyze a film sequence as this chapter has done. (Almost any film will do.) In such ways as these, you can considerably increase your awareness and understanding of the power of editing.