Learning Objectives

After reading this chapter, you should be able to

- Understand the relationship between the shot and the cut.
- Describe the film editor's major responsibilities.
- Explain the various ways that editing establishes spatial relationships between shots.
- Describe some of the ways that editing manipulates temporal relationships.
- Understand the significance of the rhythm of a movie and describe how editing is used to establish that rhythm.
- Distinguish between the two broad approaches to editing: editing to maintain continuity and editing to create discontinuity.
- Describe the fundamental building blocks of continuity editing.
- Describe the methods of maintaining consistent screen direction.
- Name and define the major types of transitions between shots, and describe how they can be used either to maintain continuity or to create discontinuity.

What Is Editing?

Editing, the basic creative force of cinema, is the process by which the editor combines and coordinates individual shots into a cinematic whole. Orson Welles said, "For my vision of the cinema, editing is not simply one aspect. It is the aspect." Both a stylistic and a technical system, editing consists of two parts. The first begins when the editor takes the footage that was shot by the cinematographer and director and then selects, arranges (as shots to be used by themselves or combined into scenes or sequences), and assembles these components into the movie's final visual form. The second part includes the mixing of all the sound tracks into the master sound track and then matching that sound track with the visual images (see Chapter 7).

Film editor and scholar Ken Dancyger distinguishes between the technique, the craft, and the art of editing. The technique (or method) is the actual joining together of two shots—often called cutting or splicing because, prior to the era of digital editing software, the editor had to first cut (or splice) each shot from its respective roll of film before gluing or taping all the shots together. The craft (skill) is the ability to join shots and produce a meaning that does not exist in either one of them individually. The art of editing, Dancyger declares, "occurs when the combination of two or more shots takes meaning to the next level—excitement, insight, shock, or the epiphany of discovery."

The basic building block of film editing is the shot (as defined in Chapter 4), and its most fundamental tool is the cut. Each shot has two explicit values: the first value is determined by what is within the shot itself; the second value is determined by how the shot is situated in relation to other shots. The first value is largely the responsibility of the director, cinematographer, production designer, and other collaborators who determine what is captured on film. The second value is the product of editing.

The early Soviet film theorist and filmmaker Lev Kuleshov reputedly demonstrated the fundamental power of editing by producing a short film (now lost, unfortunately) in which an identical shot of an expressionless actor appeared after each of these shots: a dead woman, a child, and a dish of soup. The audience viewing this film reportedly assumed that the actor was reacting to each stimulus by changing his expression appropriately—showing sorrow (for the dead woman), tenderness (for the young child), and hunger (for the food)—when in fact his expression remained the same.

This tendency of viewers to interpret shots in relation to surrounding shots is the most fundamental assumption behind all film editing. Editing takes advantage of this psychological tendency in


The Power of Editing  These images, taken from a roughly half-minute sequence from Darren Aronofsky’s *Requiem for a Dream* (2000; editor: Jay Rabinowitz), illustrate the potential power of film editing. As pictures are juxtaposed—in this case literally placed side by side using an editing technique called split screen—the meaning of one affects the meaning of the other. That is, together the shots influence our creation of their meaning—and their combined meaning then affects how we see the following two halves, whose meaning undergoes a transformation similar to that of the first two, and so on. This interpretive process goes on through the sequence, into the following shot, the following sequence, and ultimately the entire movie. Our creation of meaning proceeds from increment to increment, though at a much faster rate of calculation than this caption can convey.

All of these images, in this context, relate to drug use.

Focusing on minute details of the rituals of drug use, the sequence seeks to approximate the characters’ frantic experience and to represent the perceptual changes that accompany their intake of narcotics. Through the language of editing, Aronofsky has given us a fresh look at a phenomenon that is often portrayed in cliched and unimaginative ways.

As an experiment, try to imagine different juxtapositions of these same images, taken not in sequence but in isolation. Outside the context of drugs, what might George Washington’s image on a dollar bill next to a widened, bloodshot eye mean? What might gritting teeth next to that reddish flow mean? For that matter, to what use might someone, maybe the creator of television commercials or public-service messages, put each image alone?
order to accomplish various effects: to help tell a story, to provoke an idea or feeling, or to call attention to itself as an element of cinematic form. No matter how straightforward a movie may seem, you can be sure that (with very rare exceptions) the editor had to make difficult decisions about which shots to use and how to use them.

The Film Editor

The person primarily responsible for such decisions is the film editor. The bulk of the film editor's work occurs after the director and collaborators have shot all of the movie's footage. In many major film productions, however, the editor's responsibilities as a collaborator begin much earlier in the process. During preproduction and production—even from the moment the movie is conceived—a trusted editor may make suggestions to the director and cinematographer for composition, blocking, lighting, and shooting that will help the editing itself. Editors literally work behind the scenes, but their contributions can make the difference between artistic success and artistic failure, between an ordinary movie and a masterpiece.

A good film editor must be focused, detail-oriented, well organized, disciplined, able to work alone for long stretches of time, and willing to take as much time as necessary to fulfill the director's vision. Throughout their work, film editors must collaborate with the director and be resilient enough to withstand the producer's interference. In short, a good editor practices a rigorous craft. Even in a well-planned production, one for which the director has a clear vision of what to shoot and how it will look, the editor will face countless difficult decisions about what to use and what to cut.

Evolution of Editing Technology

That has always been the case, but today's movies run longer and contain more individual shots than movies did fifty years ago, so the editor's job has become more involved. For example, a typical Hollywood movie made in the 1940s and 50s runs approximately one to one-and-a-half hours long and is composed of about a thousand shots; today's movies typically run between two and three hours, but because they consist of approximately two to three thousand shots, they have a faster tempo than earlier films had. That factor alone increases the editor's work of selecting and arranging the footage. It is not uncommon for the ratio between unused and used footage in a Hollywood production to be as high as twenty to one, meaning that for every minute you see on the screen, twenty minutes of footage has been discarded. The postproduction problems that really challenge editors, however—the ones we sometimes read about in the press—tend to inflate this ratio of unused to used footage to extremes.

Perhaps the best-known extreme example is Francis Ford Coppola's Apocalypse Now (1979). Working for two years, Walter Murch and his editorial team eventually shaped 225 hours of footage into a (mostly) coherent movie that runs two hours and thirty-three minutes (resulting in a ratio of unused to used footage of just under a hundred to one). Sifting through the mountain of footage to find the best shots, making thousands of little decisions along the way, Murch and his team gave narrative shape to what many people at the time—including, occasionally, Coppola himself—considered a disaster of directorial self-indulgence. Twenty-two years later, Coppola asked Murch and his team to restore forty-nine minutes that they had originally cut; that version, known as the director's cut, was released in 2001 as Apocalypse Now Redux.

Clearly, the creative power of the editor comes close to that of the director. But in most mainstream film productions, that creative power is put in service of the director's vision. "One gives as much as possible," says film editor Helen van Dongen, "as much as is beneficial to the final form of the film, without overshadowing or obstructing the director's intentions.... The editor working with a great director can do no better than discover and disclose the director's design."³

The Editor’s Responsibilities

The editor is responsible for constructing the overall form of the movie and helping the production team realize its collective artistic vision by selecting, manipulating, and assembling its constituent visual and aural parts. Specifically, the editor is responsible for managing the following aspects of the final film:

> Spatial relationships between shots
> Temporal relationships between shots
> The overall rhythm of the film

Let’s examine these responsibilities more closely.

Spatial Relationships Between Shots

One of the most powerful effects of film editing is the creation of a sense of space in the mind of the viewer. When we are watching any single shot from a film, our sense of the overall space of the scene is necessarily limited by the height, width, and depth of the film frame during that shot. But as other shots are placed in close proximity to that original shot, our sense of the overall space in which the characters are moving shifts and expands. The juxtaposition of shots within a scene can cause us to have a fairly complex sense of that overall space (something like a mental map) even if no single shot discloses more than a fraction of that space to us at a time.

For example, as the opening titles roll in Kimberly Peirce’s Boys Don’t Cry (1999; editor: Lee Percy), through a short sequence of tightly framed shots we see cars dangerously passing one another on a rural highway, the exterior of a trailer park, an interior of a trailer where Teena Brandon (Hilary Swank) is getting a haircut to make her look like a teenage boy, the exterior of a skating rink, and, finally, the refashioned young woman inside introducing herself to her female blind date as “Brandon.” The shots themselves and the manner in which they are edited introduce the space clearly, tightly, and unambiguously. These shots also introduce characters, mood, and conflict. The foreboding mood is established by the steady rhythm of the editing and the equally steady drumbeat on the sound track. There seems to be no turning back for Teena, and, as a result, we sense that a conflict may arise over this young woman’s identification of her gender.

The power of editing to establish spatial relationships between shots is so strong, in fact, that there is almost no need for filmmakers to ensure that there is a real space whose dimensions correspond to the one implied by editing. Countless films—especially historical dramas and science fiction films—rely heavily on the power of editing to fool us into perceiving their worlds as vast and complete even as we are shown only tiny fractions of the implied space. Because our brains effortlessly make spatial generalizations from limited visual information, George Lucas was not required, for example, to build an entire to-scale model of the Millennium Falcon to convince us that the characters in Star Wars are flying (and moving around within) a vast spaceship. Instead, a series of cleverly composed shots filmed on carefully designed (and relatively small) sets could, when edited together, create the illusion of a massive, fully functioning spacecraft.

In addition to painting a mental picture of the space of a scene, editing manipulates our sense of spatial relationships among characters, objects, and their surroundings. For example, the placement of one shot of a person’s reaction (perhaps a look of concerned shock) after a shot of an action by another person (falling down a flight of stairs) immediately creates in our minds the thought that the two people are occupying the same space, that the person in the first shot is visible to the person in the second shot, and that the emotional response of the person in the second shot is a reaction to what has happened to the person in the first shot. The central discovery of Lev Kuleshov, the Soviet film theorist mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, was that these two shots need not have any actual relationship at all to one another for this effect to take place in a viewer’s mind. The effect of perceiving such spatial relationships even when we are given minimal visual information or when we are presented with shots filmed at entirely different times and places is sometimes called the Kuleshov effect.

DVD The Kuleshov Experiment Experiment
The Kuleshov Effect  In Joel Coen's *Raising Arizona* (1987; editor: Michael R. Miller), a simple example of the Kuleshov effect is used for comic effect to depict a moment when H. I. "Hi" McDonough (Nicolas Cage), a kidnapper, has a guilt-induced fantasy in which Leonard Smalls (Randall "Tex" Cobb), an avenging bounty hunter, is on his trail. After speeding across the desert, throwing grenades at rabbits to show his power, Smalls rides up a road [1–2] and over a hill [3], where, with a cut to the next shot [4], he enters [5] an entirely different place [6]. The action is edited in such a way as to fool us into perceiving the jump and the landing as a single, continuous action taking place in a single, continuous space, even though the first shot (images 1–3) is completely different in time, terrain, and vegetation from the second (images 4–6).
Temporal Relationships Between Shots

We have already learned that the plot of a narrative film is very often shaped and ordered in a way that differs significantly from the film's underlying story. In fact, the pleasure that many contemporary movies give us has its source in the bold decisions made by some filmmakers to manipulate the presentation of the plot in creative and confusing ways. Films such as Christopher Nolan's *Memento* (2000; editor: Dody Dorn), Spike Jonze's *Adaptation* (2002; editor: Eric Zumbrunnen), or Michel Gondry's *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* (2004; editor: Valdis Oskarsdottir), are interesting in part because their plots are presented in a fragmented, out-of-order fashion that we as viewers must reshuffle in order to make sense of the underlying story. But even in more traditional narrative films in which the plot is presented in a more or less chronological manner, editing is used to manipulate the presentation of plot time onscreen.

For example, the flashback (the interruption of chronological plot time with a shot or series of shots that show an event that has happened earlier in the story) is a very common editing technique. Used in virtually all movie genres, it is a traditional storytelling device that typically explains how a situation or character developed into what we see at the present time. For example, after a scene in George Clooney's *Confessions of a Dangerous Mind* (2003; editor: Stephen Mirrione) in which a TV personality, Chuck Barris (Sam Rockwell), stands naked and stares at a television screen, there is a flashback to the events that contributed to his astonishing life.

The flashback can be as stimulating as it is in Orson Welles's *Citizen Kane* (1941; editor: Robert Wise), where our sense of Charles Foster Kane is created by the memories of those who knew him; or as straightforward as Walter Neff's (Fred MacMurray) onscreen narration of Billy Wilder's classic film noir, *Double Indemnity* (1944; editor: Doane Harrison); in fact, the flashback is frequently used in film noir. It can also serve as the backbone for the structure of a complicated narrative, as in Alain Resnais's *Hiroshima mon amour* (1959; editors: Jasmine Chasney, Henri Colpi, and Anne Sarraute) or Quentin Tarantino's *Pulp Fiction* (1994; editor: Sally Menke).

Much less common than the flashback is the flashforward, the interruption of present action by a shot or series of shots that shows images from the plot's future. Often, flashforwards reflect a character's desire for someone or something, a premonition of something that might happen, or even a psychic projection. Flashforward is a problematic element in any film that strives for realism because it implies that the characters in the film are somehow seeing the future. Once employed, flashforward sends the signal that the movie we are watching is at least partly fantastical, and that we should be ready to suspend our disbelief. For example, in Steven Soderbergh's brilliant thriller *The Limey* (1999; editor: Sarah Flack), Wilson (Terence Stamp) imagines that he is shooting Terry Valentine (Peter Fonda). The scene, at a crowded party, is repeated three times; in each repetition, Wilson approaches from a slightly different direction, carries a different pistol, and hits Valentine in a different part of his body. The last attempt is lethal, but the sequence, we learn later, is wish fulfillment—a fantasy, not a fact.

The most common manipulation of time through editing is ellipsis, an omission between one thing and another. In a quotation, for example, an ellipsis mark ( . . . ) signifies the omission of one or more words. In filmmaking, an ellipsis generally signifies the omission of time—the time that separates one shot from another. Ellipsis in movies is first and foremost a *practical* tool; it economizes the presentation of plot, skipping over portions of the underlying story that do not need to be presented onscreen to be understood or inferred. But its use requires the filmmaker to have carefully established the time, place, location, characters, and action so that viewers are able not only to follow what they see, but also to make the intuitive inferences that fill in the material that was left out. This is what happens in Gus Van Sant's *Drugstore Cowboy* (1989; editors: Mary Bauer and Curtiss Clayton) when a policeman asks Bob (Matt Dillon), a heroin addict, “Are you going to tell us where you hid the drugs, or are we going to have to tear the place apart bit by bit?” When the next shot shows Bob's house torn apart, the cut implies an ellipsis of time, and it presents us with everything we need.
to know about the period of story time that has elapsed.

The effect of an ellipsis on viewers is determined by how much story time is implied between shots, as well as by the manner in which the editing makes the transition from the first shot to the second. In some cases, such as the example from *Drugstore Cowboy* just mentioned, an ellipsis can seem a very natural progression and may signal a straightforward cause-and-effect relationship. In others, an ellipsis may span a much longer period of implied story time, or the transition may be so unexpected and sudden that the effect on viewers is shock or disorientation.

For example, in Steven Soderbergh’s *Erin Brockovich* (2000; editor: Anne V. Coates), the title character (played by Julia Roberts), while driving away from an unsuccessful job interview, is hit broadside. We don’t see what happens as the immediate result of this incident, for there is a sharp elliptical cut to a scene in which lawyer Ed Masry (Albert Finney) arrives at his office and is told by his secretary that a woman named Erin Brockovich is waiting to see him: “car accident; not her fault, she says.” When he enters his office, he sees Erin wearing a neck brace. However, we don’t know how much time has elapsed between the accident and this meeting.

An ellipsis may also span a longer period of implied story time. David Lean’s *Lawrence of Arabia* (1962; editor: Anne V. Coates) contains a very effective cut that suggests an unspecified amount of elapsed time. T. E. Lawrence (Peter O’Toole) receives his charge from Mr. Dryden (Claude Rains), a British officer in Cairo; as he does so, he lights a cigarette, blows out the match, and says, “It’s going to be fun,” as the scene suddenly cuts to a shot of Lawrence enjoying coffee and food on the Arabian desert. We learn that he’s made the trip from Cairo by boat, but we don’t know how long it took.

Playing with time, and particularly with ellipses of all kinds, has become one of Steven Soderbergh’s stylistic trademarks. In *The Limey* (1999; editor: Sarah Flack), the time and space of the entire movie are edited to be disorienting. The engine that drives the narrative is a continual use of the ellipsis for shock and/or disorientation.
England and California are constantly juxtaposed, as are the present, past, and future; and memory, imagination, flashbacks, and flashforwards. Some shots identify characters in full frames; others do not. We are never quite sure where or when the action is taking place. However, the cumulative progress of disorientation eventually leads us to put the pieces together, to see repeating patterns, and to become oriented.

Whether sudden and unexpected or seemingly natural, ellipses are also frequently used to provide an instant, sometimes comic, resolution to a situation. In Out of Sight (1998; editor: Anne V. Coates), for example, director Soderbergh tells the story of an improbable romance between two highly attractive people: Jack Foley (George Clooney), a notorious bank robber; and Karen Sisco (Jennifer Lopez), a federal marshal. Sisco has witnessed Foley and a buddy bust out of prison, and they take her hostage, but she escapes. The next day, she learns that Foley is in Miami, and, with gun in hand, she enters his hotel room and discovers him relaxing in the bathtub. As she bends over him with her gun pointed at his head, he pulls her into the water on top of him, she lays down the gun, and they kiss.

There is a quick cut, and an obvious ellipsis, for the next shot is of Sisco’s father standing over her in a hospital bed with a dark bruise on her forehead. From earlier in the movie, we know that she got to the hospital as a result of a car crash that occurred during her escape from Foley and his buddy. However disorienting this ellipsis may be, it is also funny because, in such romantic comedies, it is conventional for opposites to fall for one another; perhaps even to become partners in crime, à la Bonnie and Clyde, whose portrayals on the screen (in Arthur Penn’s Bonnie and Clyde, 1967) Sisco and Foley have previously discussed with admiration.

Another method for controlling the presentation of time in a film is montage. Montage—from the French verb monter, “to assemble or put together”—is the French word for “editing.” In the former Soviet Union in the 1920s, montage referred to the various forms of editing that expressed ideas developed by Eisenstein, Kuleshov, Vertov, Pudovkin, and others. In Hollywood, beginning in the 1930s, montage designates a sequence of shots, often with superimpositions and optical effects, that shows a condensed series of events. For example, a montage of flipping calendar pages was a typical (if trite) way to show the passage of time. In Wes Anderson’s Rushmore (1998; editor: David Moritz), after the headmaster identifies Max Fischer (Jason Schwartzman) as “one of the worst students we’ve got,” a twenty-one-shot montage unexpectedly shows Max as the key person in virtually every club at the school.

The hilarious Team America: World Police (2004; editor: Tom Vogt), an irreverent comedy from
Montage Although these still shots do not convey the pace of the lively lyrics in the "Montage!" sequence of Trey Parker's Team America: World Police (2004), imagine a driving disco beat accompanying these images of Spottswoode overseeing the process by which Gary Johnston is being made into a complete soldier: close-up of Johnston [1]; Johnston practicing on firing range [2], running on a treadmill [3], lifting weights [4], and engaging in karate with Spottswoode [5].

director Trey Parker (creator of South Park), has more targets than it can possibly reach in ninety-seven minutes, but it hits dead right on the montage technique. At the end of the movie, Spottswoode (voice of Daran Norris), the sinister mastermind of Team America, believes that his protégé, Gary Johnston (voice of Parker), is the man to thwart the plan of Kim Jong Il (voice of Parker) to use weapons of mass destruction to end the world. The problem is that Spottswoode has to make a complete soldier of Johnston in "very little time." Johnston naively asks: "How are we gonna do that?" and Spottswoode replies, "I think I know just what we need." Thus begins a musical sequence called "Montage!"—set to a lively disco beat—in which a time-condensing montage sequence (using many split screens) is accompanied by lyrics breathlessly announcing the technique and style of the conventional montage sequence:

... show us the passage of time—we're gonna need a montage!
... show a lot of things that are happening at once to remind everyone of what's going on
... with every shot, show a little improvement; to show it all would take too long—that's called a montage;
... even Rocky had a montage

and
always fade-out in a montage; if you fade-out, it seems more time has passed in a montage.

This sequence provides an excellent example of a montage as it simultaneously satirizes action movies. The “Montage!” song itself was borrowed from South Park.

In order for these various editorial manipulations of time to be understandable to viewers, editors must employ accepted conventions of editing to signal the transitions from shot to shot. Luckily, our minds are able to understand these conventions and to infer correctly the progression of plot and story from them, even when the plot is presented in nonchronological order and is riddled with ellipses. It’s not entirely clear why our brains are able to do this, but for the sake of film history, it’s a good thing. As Walter Murch puts it,

When you stop to think about it, it is amazing that film editing works at all. One moment we’re on top of Mauna Kea and—cut—the next we’re at the bottom of the Mariana Trench. The instantaneous transition of the cut is nothing like what we experience as normal life, which seems to be one continuous shot from the moment we wake until we close our eyes at night. It wouldn’t have been surprising if film editing had been tried and then abandoned after it was found to induce a kind of seasickness. But it doesn’t: we happily endure, in fact, even enjoy, these sudden transitions for which nothing in our evolutionary history seems to have prepared us.

**Rhythm** Among other things, editing determines the **duration** of a shot. Thus it controls the **length** of time you can look at each shot and absorb the information within it. An editor can control the rhythm (or, to use musical terminology, the beat) of a film—the pace at which it moves forward—by varying the duration of the shots in relation to one another; and thus control the speed (tempo) and accents (stress or lack of it on certain shots). Sometimes the editing rhythm allows us time to think about what we see; other times it moves too quickly to permit thought.

The musical analogy is useful, but only to a point, because a movie serves a narrative, while rhythm seldom does. However, there are some landmarks in the development of movie editing—among them the “Odessa Steps” sequence in Sergei Eisenstein’s Battleship Potemkin (1925; editors: Grigori Akesandrov and Eisenstein), the diving sequence in Leni Riefenstahl’s Olympia (1938; editor: Riefenstahl), Jean-Luc Godard’s Breathless (1960; editors: Cécile Decugis and Lila Herman), Andy and Larry Wachowskis’s The Matrix (1999; editor: Zach Stenberg), and Tom Tykwer’s Run Lola Run (1998; editor: Mathilde Bonnefoy)—in which the editing (its patterns, rhythms, etc.) seem almost to take precedence over the narrative. A movie narrative has its own internal requirements that signal the editor how long to make each shot and with what rhythm to combine those shots. Many professional editors say that they **intuitively** reach decisions on these matters.

What happens, however, when the rhythm is imposed autocratically **before** a film is made? To find out, you might look at Jørgen Leth and Lars von Trier’s The Five Obstructions (2004; editors: Morten Hejbjerg and Camilla Skovsen). In the movie, von Trier, one of the founders of the Danish Dogme movement, views Leth’s twelve-minute film The Perfect Human (1967) and, in an interesting reversal of roles—Leth was one of von Trier’s idols—“orders” the older director to remake the film five times, each version tightly controlled by limitations (“obstructions”) that he specifies. The first version is to be composed of single shots of no more than twelve frames, each shot appearing for approximately one-half of a second on the screen. The result, a charming look at Cuba, closely resembles a television advertisement or an MTV spot.

Of course, the images “tell” a kind of story simply by the rhythm that links them, but this rigid imposition of a fixed rhythm makes traditional editing, and thus traditional storytelling, impossible. Why? Because editing requires the editor to make decisions about shot length, rhythm, emphasis, and the like; and von Trier’s formula (as successfully applied by Leth) ties the editor’s hands and puts all

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