

TRANSITIONS

The connections between shots are as important as the shots themselves and usually signify changes in time and place in narrative films. Today, segues of almost every type are used, with the greatest type of experimentation going on in commercials and music videos. In all, there are only seven ways of putting two pieces of film together. They are:

- The cut
- The dissolve
- The wipe
- The fade out
- The fade in
- The white-in
- The white-out
(or any colored version of this)

The Cut

Habit and convention have established that the dissolve indicates a passage of time, while the cut is a present-tense segue. While this was an acceptable generalization for most of the films in the '30s and '40s, today there are many more exceptions. The cut has undergone the greatest change and is used in much wider application in connecting different periods of time. Television has popularized techniques that speed up the plot, and the cut has become the connection of choice. One use that has become a favored technique in television (now in features, too) is the montage sequence, connected by cuts. Typically the montage sequence covers hours rather than days or weeks. Take, for example, the scene in Steven Spielberg's *Jaws* in which Officer Brody, Captain Quint and Hooper assemble the shark cage on board the fishing vessel, the *Orca*. The scene is made up of six shots each lasting 3 seconds for a total of about 18 seconds, compressing what would probably take half an hour. In this case, the compositions are composed angularly and record strong graphic contrasts in medium and close shots, alerting us to the fact that normal, real-time continuity is being interrupted. The result is a rhythmically compelling sequence that is vigorous yet smooth. Another use of this technique, using a single camera angle and composition, might show the construction of a house or the growth of a family, with weeks and years foreshortened into a few seconds. This type of scene usually maintains frame registration, and the result is a crude form of stop-motion, frequently used for comic effect.

The Dissolve

The dissolve, once approaching the status of a cliché, has begun to look fresh again having been replaced by the cut for many of its uses in recent years. Regardless, it's best if the filmmaker disregards fashion and employs whatever technique does the best job in a given situation.

Because the dissolve can form a bridge between disparate times and places, however shaky the logic of the connection, it has always been thought of as a kind of Band-Aid for badly structured films.

While the practice in the continuity style is to hide the cut, the dissolve is intended to be seen or at least experienced. Dissolves can be any length but usually last anywhere from approximately 1/2 second (10-12 frames) to extremely expressive lengths of over a minute. The shortest dissolve possible, and one rarely seen today, is the so-called soft-cut, a dissolve lasting only 1 to 10 frames. The soft-cut was used in situations where a transition required smoothing, such as nature footage in a documentary. For example, the only available shots of a lion chasing a zebra might force the editor to combine jarring, fast-moving shots to convey the basic action. A dissolve could smooth the transitions but would be confusing and work against the speed of the action. A straight cut would produce jumpy results. In this case, the single-frame dissolve would be employed as a compromise. It would soften the cut but not slow down the action. Usually the soft-cut is undetectable and even most filmmakers cannot tell the difference. Its effect is subliminal.

Focus-In/Out

In a focus-in/out, the tail of one shot loses focus until the image is completely blurred and is dissolved to the next shot, which begins with a new blurred image that is then focused in. Technically, it's a dissolve, but one that is concealed by another effect. Properly executed, the dissolve is invisible because the two unfocused shots are joined at a point where the images are too blurred to be identified. The loss of focus is usually gradual, and the dissolve blends the two shots together as if they were one. Of course, the viewer knows a bit of movie magic is taking place. The effect has often been used as a POV shot, indicating loss of consciousness. One version you've probably seen many times is the patient-in-an-operating-room shot. We share the patient's viewpoint as he is anesthetized and the operating room becomes a blur. Slowly the picture returns to sharpness, and we are in a recovery room hours later.

The Match Shot

Match shots are two adjacent shots that share a graphic element that is registered identically in each. Though described in many screenplays as a match cut, most often a dissolve links the shots. The dissolve helps to smooth out any imperfections in registration and lets the viewer enjoy the change more thoroughly. But this is not always the case. In *A bout de Souffle* (*Breathless*), Jean-Luc Godard makes a match cut on Jean Seberg as she drives in a convertible with the top down. Suddenly the background changes from day to night though the car and driver remain in the same position—a very radical cut in its day. Interestingly, it combines two very different qualities: the disruptive time shift of the jump cut and the graphic smoothness of the match cut.

Wipes

A traditional wipe is rarely seen today unless the filmmaker wants to deliberately recall the Hollywood style of the '30s and '40s. In its most familiar form the wipe is the cross-frame movement of a new shot over an old one and resembles a curtain being drawn. George Lucas used angular wipes in *Star Wars*—homage to the serials made by B studios like Monogram and Republic, which inspired the movie.

Wipes can move in any direction, vertically, horizontally or diagonally across the frame. Circles, squares, and spirals—any conceivable shape—can be used to remove one shot and introduce a new one. A wipe can be shaped to resemble a desired design element like a police badge or a keyhole expanding or contracting until one shot has replaced the other. *Flying Down to Rio* (1933), the movie that introduced the team of Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers, contains dozens of different wipes used throughout the course of the movie to combine scenes.

Another variation of the wipe, the push-off or push-over, has the incoming shot “pushing” the outgoing shot from the frame so that it appears to be moving intact across the frame. This differs from the traditional wipe in which the new shot appears to move *over* the one it is replacing.

A wipe can also be combined with an element in the shot moving in the same direction and at the same rate—for example, a telephone pole or a tree. In this case, the leading edge of the wipe is matched to the movement of the pole or tree trunk. Cars or joggers or an elevator door, anything moving across the frame, can motivate a wipe of this kind. A version of this type of wipe used in cartoons has an animated character pulling the new shot into place. A recent car commercial shows an outgoing shot of a car “torn” from the screen in strips as if it were paper, revealing a perfectly registered car of a different color underneath.

The Action Wipe

The action wipe lies somewhere between an optical wipe and a match cut and is made in the camera or, to be more specific, in the editing room. The action wipe connects two shots in a scene rather than linking two scenes in different locations. In almost every case, this effect is used to move from a wide shot to a medium or close shot, making the cut smoother by what amounts to an “invisible” cut on action. What distinguishes this cut from a normal cut on action is that the action is not of the principal subject. Instead, some design element within the frame that moves between the camera and the principal subject provides the action. The element can be any object positioned close enough to the camera to completely block the lens while moving through the shot. Typically, the action would be shot twice with the movement the same in each shot and the angle of view identical, but with a change in frame size. Later the two shots would be connected at the point where the subject is blocked from our view. In recent years the action wipes have also been used to connect shots taken from different viewing angles and even different periods of time (Figure 21.1).

As with the match shot, which is similar to the action wipe, a cut or dissolve can connect the shots in an action wipe. Usually a dissolve is used to make the effect as seamless as possible.

Transformations

In special cases the transformation of the principal subject in a shot can be considered a transition. Strictly speaking, the transformation is not the joining of two separate shots—the definition of a transition—but there is a complete change of subject. Figure 21.2 is a series of transformations by the pioneer animator, Emile Cohl, from 1909.

Up until recently, this type of effect was so unusual that there was no reason to consider it anything but a novelty. Computer graphics, however, are now able to execute far more complex transformations between photographic images relatively easily. Portions of the frame, or the entire picture, can be broken down and reconstructed into a new photographic image smoothly with great textural and dynamic variation. So far, these effects have been used almost entirely for graphics in titles for television commercials and a few science fiction films.

As computer graphics (and video) make further inroads into film, these transitions will no doubt be used in narrative films. At the moment, these effects are designed for maximum impact to hold viewer attention. This is very nearly the opposite goal of transitions in the continuity style, but computer graphics are capable of any sort of image configuration if the time and energy is spent to execute it. We can expect much more of this in the future.

Fades

The fade to black and the fade up from black has the effect of setting episodes off from one another like

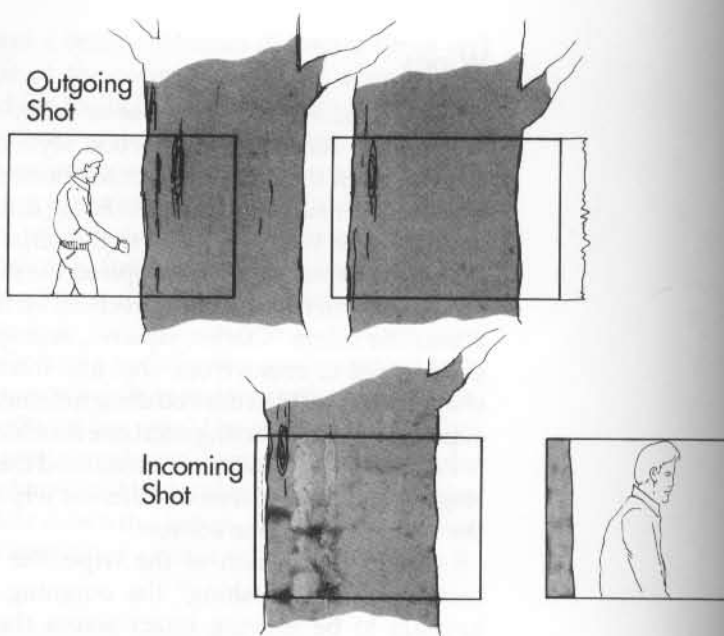


Figure 21.1: The action wipe.

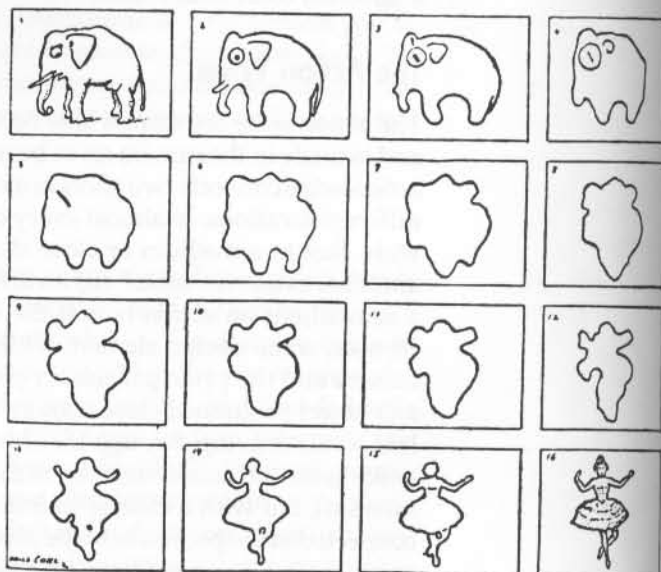


Figure 21.2

chapter headings. In this respect, the purpose of the fade is fundamentally different from the dissolve or cut. The fade separates scenes, while the dissolve and cut connect scenes. Going to black and then coming out of black to picture is a complete departure from the narrative, though if it is done rapidly the pause is minimal.

A fade can employ pictorial elements in the scene. A typical use of this idea would be a scene in a room that ends with the lights being turned off. While still in black, the cut is made to the next scene, which could begin with a train coming out of the darkness of a tunnel.

White-In/White-Out/Color

Fades can be made to and from any color or made to white, an effect that John Huston used for the closing shot of *Prizzi's Honor*. The movie ends at a bright sunny window that slowly becomes blindingly white until the frame is completely bleached out. This is the end of the film, so we don't return to another scene, but obviously all that would be needed to do so is a white-in. This can be motivated by any bright element in the new shot like a bright sky or lamp. The white-out has a particularly ethereal quality, though there is no real convention attached to the mood it produces, unlike the dissolve, which tends toward the lyrical and elegiac.

The Freeze Frame

This effect differs from the other types of visual punctuation we've looked at in that it is usually employed as a period rather than a transition between scenes. The best known use of the freeze frame is in Truffaut's *Les quatre cents coups* (*The 400 Blows*) in the memorable final shot of Antoine Doinel alone on the beach. The elegiac quality of the shot, the sense of finality and inescapable fate became a favorite effect in the '60s and was so overused that it has almost completely disappeared. More recently, the freeze frame has served a more practical use as a species of POV when used to show the viewpoint of a photographer taking a picture. Usually we are watching some action when a burst of white and the sound of a shutter closing indicate a strobe flash and the moment of exposure. The action freezes momentarily showing us the photo that the photographer desires. The effect was used well in Robert Altman's *M.A.S.H.* when Hawkeye and Pierce break in on an officer who is shackled up with a Japanese girl in order to take compromising pictures. We see the pictures as a series of freeze frames as the officer madly scrambles to pull on his trousers.

Montage

Montage is a problematic term. To the Europeans all editing is montage; to the early Soviet filmmakers, Kuleshov, Pudovkin, and Eisenstein, it meant their special brand of associative editing. In the United States and Great Britain, montage has its own special meaning: a brief sequence of linking devices, usually dissolves, used to convey the passage of time or a series of locations. It is this transitional use that is of interest to us here.

Actually, montage of this type is not so much a linking device as a condensed narrative, a form of visual shorthand that uses actual transitions (dissolves, cuts, fade-ins/outs) in rapid succession to link ideas. Montage frequently uses symbolic images to represent change—for instance, piles of coins and dollars that grow larger dissolved against images of the stock exchange and industry to show the financial rise of a character. Slavko Vorkapich, an immigrant from Yugoslavia, became known as a montage specialist in the United States during the late silent and early sound periods creating these types of sequences. Vorkapich was a gifted filmmaker with an interest in experimental films and the avant-garde film movement in Europe. Like other filmmakers experimenting with new techniques, he found work in Hollywood creating new versions of standard narrative sequences depicting dreams, drunkenness, after-death experiences and other altered states and fantastic realms.

The montage is not used much today. When a long period of time is condensed to a short sequence, cuts are preferred to dissolves. Montage that conveys an idea or concept, as in the pile of money example, is rarer still, leaving an opportunity to experiment with old techniques in new ways.

Split-Screen Effects

Actually the split-screen is not exactly a transitional effect, though it is used to join images that would otherwise be seen in separate shots. In 1927 the French director Abel Gance used the technique in several sequences in his epic biography, *Napoleon*, turning the screen into a triptych. He called this early wide-screen process Polyvision. Three projectors were used to obtain the necessary width for panoramic shots, but they could be used in any combination, each showing a different image or a center image flanked by two identical shots. Occasional use of the split-screen was used in the silent era to show two sides of a telephone conversation simultaneously, and a related technique, created with a multi-image lens, multiplied a single image in a revolving circular pattern. This became a standard representation for hallucinations and nightmares. Later, Busby Berkeley would use this device for purely graphic design.

Split-screen effects were never widely used and all but disappeared by the '40s. The technique was resurrected in the '60s in John Frankenheimer's *Grand Prix* with the screen split into varying patterns of mortices. Anyone familiar with multi-image slide shows would recognize the technique, and though this type of multimedia presentation has continued to develop and thrive in corporate and advertising communication, there has been no cross-over to narrative film.

The only director who has continually experimented with the split-screen is Brian DePalma who has made a genuine effort to use the effect to discover new ways of telling a story. The effect is usually done as an optical at a lab after the film has been shot, but for compositional reasons it is probably best to compose the frame with the split-screen in mind. Simple split-screen effects can also be created in any camera that can be accurately backwound and is therefore well within the means of independent filmmakers.