

# CINEMATIC STORYTELLING



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THE 100 MOST POWERFUL FILM CONVENTIONS EVERY FILMMAKER MUST KNOW JENNIFER VAN SIELEN

# SPACE: 2-D & 3-D SCREEN DIRECTION

Film space refers to the spatial dynamics inherent in the film frame. A film frame is both a static snapshot and part of a moving picture. When coupled with motion, screen direction becomes a powerful story element.

## Static Image and Motion

Like a painting, the static image of the frame presents inherent storytelling opportunities. Because a movie is a motion picture, the composition of the frame continuously changes. This added characteristic affords two important story elements — that of screen direction and comparison. Screen direction can suggest antagonism, individualism, and conflict, for example. A moving frame might be used to represent change, similarity or dissimilarity, or its opposite, stasis.

## Screen Direction

Screen Direction refers to the direction a character or object is travelling.

X-axis refers to the line that cuts the frame horizontally. Objects can run left-to-right or right-to-left along the X-axis.

Y-axis refers to the line that cuts the frame vertically. Objects can move up or down the Y-axis, that is, from the top of the frame to the bottom and vice-versa.

Z-axis refers to the axis that runs from the foreground-to-the-background or background- to-the-foreground in the frame. The Z-axis is what gives the audience its sense of 3-D space or depth-of-field.

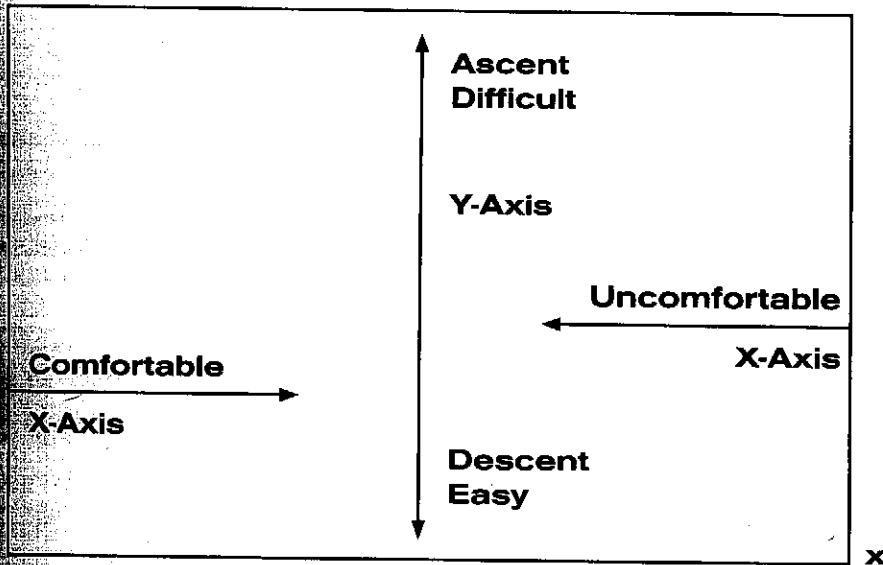
Here's how screen direction expressed six different ideas.

## Film Element: Screen Direction

- |                              |                                  |                      |
|------------------------------|----------------------------------|----------------------|
| 1. X-axis (Horizontal)       | ( <i>Strangers on a Train</i> )  | Pending Conflict     |
| 2. Y-axis (Vertical)         | ( <i>Strangers on a Train</i> )  | Detouring            |
| 3. XY-axes (Diagonals)       | ( <i>Metropolis, The Piano</i> ) | Descent              |
| 4. Z-axis (Depth-of-field)   | ( <i>Citizen Kane</i> )          | Separate Time Zones  |
| 5. Z-axis (Planes of Action) | ( <i>Dolores Claiborne</i> )     | Change of Size       |
| 6. Z-axis (Rack Focus)       | ( <i>The Graduate</i> )          | Shifting Perspective |

Fig. 1

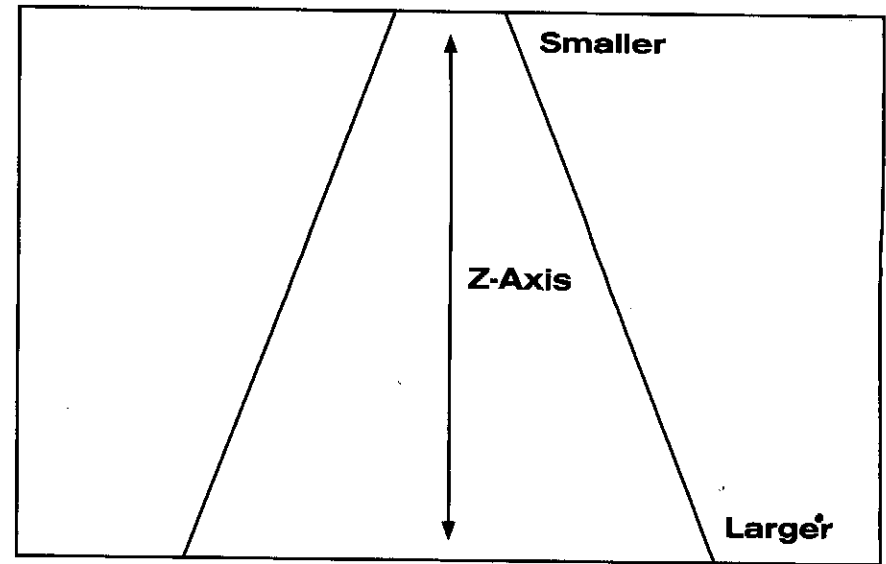
### 2-Dimensional Screen Direction



Movement in Flat 2-Dimensional Space

Fig. 2

### 3-Dimensional Screen Direction



Movement in Depth Along the Z-Axis

**X-axis:** The eye moves comfortably from left to right as this mimics reading. The eye is less experienced to move the opposite direction and is therefore less comfortable.

**Y-axis:** Moving an object down the screen appears easy as it is aided by our sense of gravity. Moving an object up the screen will appear difficult because it is assumed it will be resisted by gravity.

**Z-axis:** When an object moves along the Z-axis the object appears to move in 3-D space moving from front-to-back or back-to-front. Image size will change depending on where the object appears on the trajectory and which lens has been used.

## 11. Film Element: Size

A character's relative strength and weakness can be established by the use of size.

### Film Example: *Metropolis*

In Fritz Lang's brilliant film *Metropolis* (1927) he depicts two worlds:

#### Shot 1

The outer world is the world of soaring modern buildings that represent the best of man's technical achievement. These mammoth architectural feats dominate the frame and seemingly stretch up to the clouds. Only the elite in this metropolis live above ground to enjoy its benefits.

#### Shot 2

Lang contrasts the massive skyscrapers with the ant-like men who build them. These dehumanized workers shuffle along in columns and are forced to live in "ant colonies," beneath the ground. The workers are dwarfed by the building they create and the machines that enslave them.

### Dramatic Value

Lang uses size to contrast the power of the "upper world" with the "world beneath."

### Other Films

*Citizen Kane* (fireplace scene: Kane versus Susan)

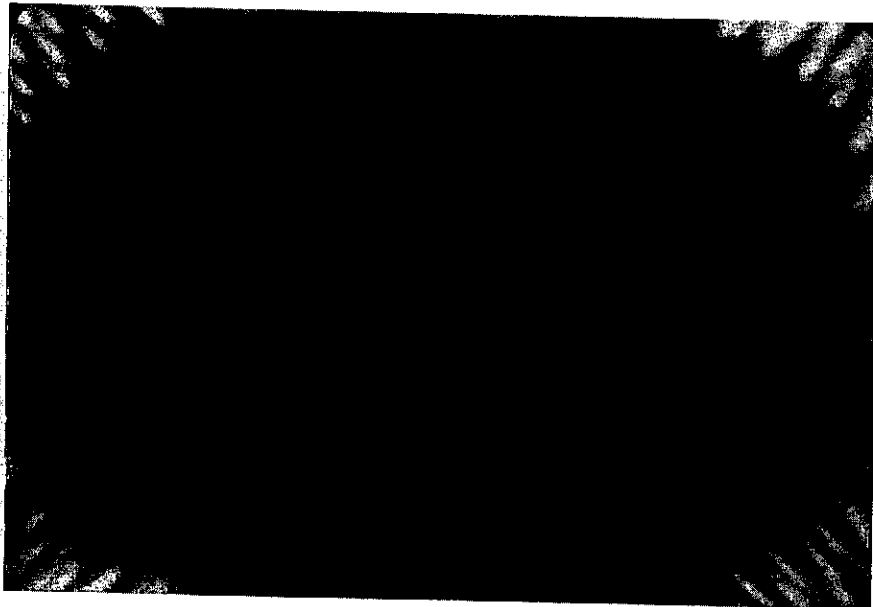
*ET* (introduction: trucks versus ET)

*Jaws* (throughout the movie: sharks versus man)

1.



2.



## 13. Film Element: Linear

Linear simply refers to the use of lines. Lines can externalize any number of abstract ideas. When made physical, they offer another way of communicating ideas. In the example below, Jerry Lundegard, the protagonist in the Coen Brothers' *Fargo*, is at a "crossroads." The Coen brothers physically express this idea by carving out a set of "crossroads" into the snow through the use of snow tires. Here's more about the scene.

### Film Example: *Fargo*

*Fargo*'s protagonist, Jerry Lundegard, is a bumbling car salesman who is over his head in debt. He decides to have his rich wife kidnapped. The plan is dependent on his father-in-law paying the ransom. Jerry will act as the middle-man, pocket the ransom, then pay off his debts. At the last minute, he has a chance to make the money another way. But his father-in-law thwarts the deal. Jerry is now at a crossroads. Jerry can confess his responsibility for the kidnapping that is already in motion, or see it to the end.

The Coen brothers beautifully externalize Jerry's "crossroads" moment. The scene opens with a high-angle shot of a snow-covered parking lot. There is a huge "cross" in the frame made by snow tires. Jerry approaches the "crossroads." Instead of returning to his father-in-law's office and confessing what he's done, he advances past the crossroads and gets into his parked car. Once inside he realizes he isn't going to stop the plan. He jumps out, and hacks away at the ice-covered windshield with a scraper. He knows he's weak, and hates himself for it.

### Dramatic Value

Symbolic use of graphics can externalize ideas and character choices. If set up properly they can also help us measure a character's decision-making over time. For example, if symbols of success are put up on the screen, then the audience can judge how close characters are in attaining them, or how far they still have to go.

### Script Note

In this version of the script, the first half of the scene only mentions the high-angle. The rest of the scripted scene focuses on Jerry's scraping of the windshield. In the filmed version the first half of the scene is expanded and introduces a crossroads metaphor which greatly enhances the actions that follow.

### Other Films

*Witness*

*Metropolis*

**Fargo (1996)**

Screenplay: Joel Coen & Ethan Coen, Draft: Nov. 2, 1994.

PARKING LOT

We are high and wide on the office building's parking lot.

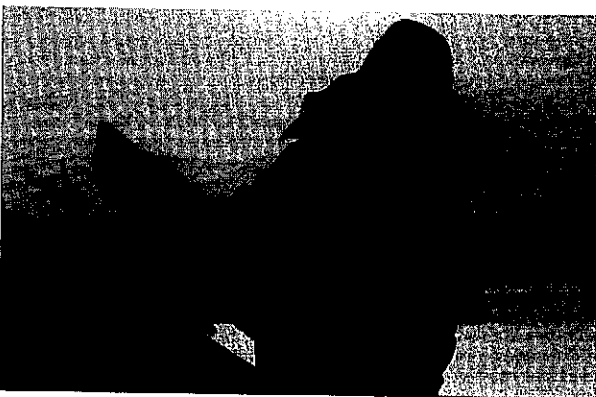
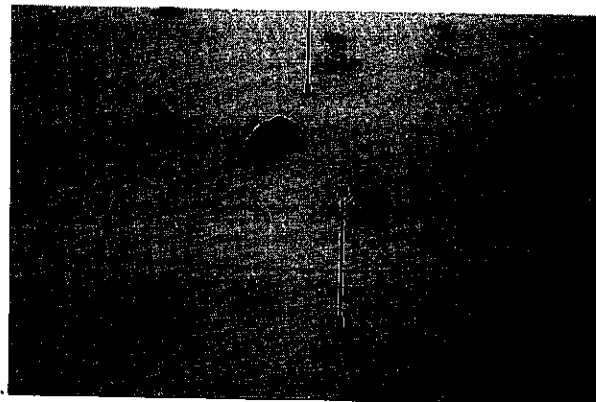
Jerry emerges wrapped in a parka, his arms sticking stiffly out at his sides, his breath vaporizing. He goes to his car, opens its front door, pulls out a red plastic scraper and starts methodically scraping off the thin crust of ice that has developed on his windshield.

The scrape-scrape-scrape sound carries in the frigid air.

Jerry goes into a frenzy, banging the scraper against the windshield and the hood of his car.

The tantrum passes. Jerry stands panting, staring at nothing in particular.

Scrape-scrape-scrape - he goes back to work on the windshield.



## 16. Film Element: Organic versus Geometric

In general, organic shapes are associated with nature, geometric shapes with man. These symbols can be used for different purposes. In *Witness* they distinguish the Amish from the urban; in *Metropolis*, they differentiate the oppressed from the oppressors.

### Film Example: *Witness*

Protagonist John Book represents the American urban life. The Amish, with whom he comes to live, have rejected technology and urban commerce. They live simply and off the land.

Book's world is symbolized by geometric shapes, lines, squares, and rectangles.

The Amish, on the other hand, are represented by the circular, and naturally occurring forms like soft swaying stocks of wheat.

### Film Example: *Metropolis* (not pictured)

Fritz Lang's *Metropolis* takes us into the future where an earthly high-tech utopia has been built. Its lines are linear and geometric.

Just outside the linear urban center, an elite paradise has been created for the few. Its lines are organic. Despite the initial appearance of beauty, it has an ugly underbelly, as it was built by those who are prohibited entry.

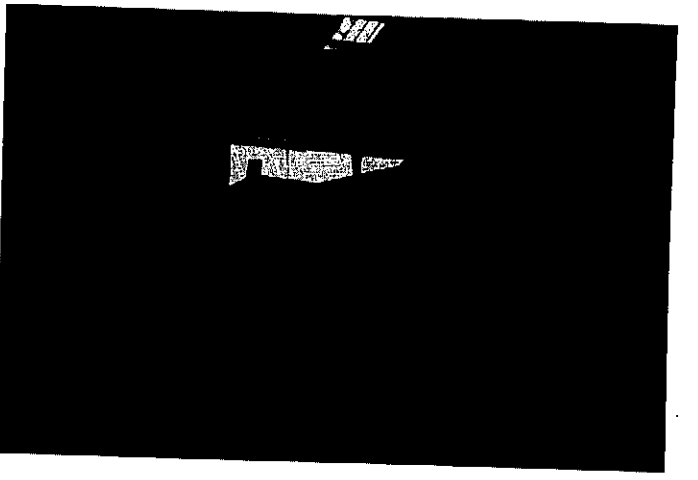
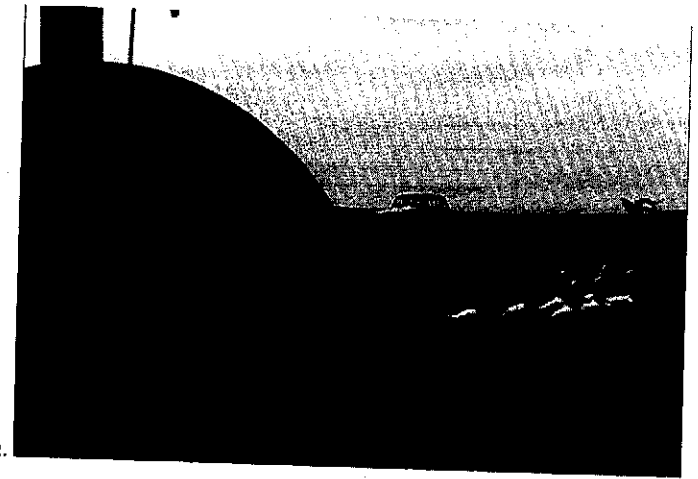
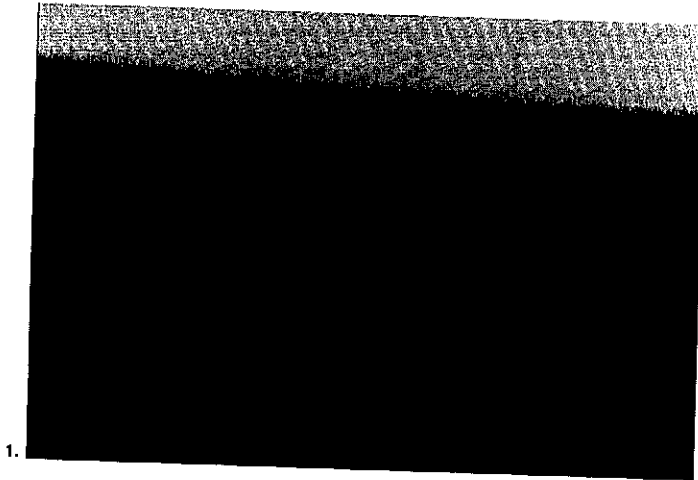
### Dramatic Value

In *Witness* the contrast of shapes was used to underscore the central theme of the movie: that the two worlds (geometric and organic) could not easily mesh.

In *Metropolis*: The organic world is for the privileged only, a Garden of Eden for the few. It subverts the idea of the Garden's innocence as it is founded on brutal economic conditions. Here the organic has a negative meaning.

Take a look at how these graphic principles are used in the film excerpts on the accompanying page.





## 60. Film Element: Two-Shot

A *two-shot* is when two characters are filmed in a single shot. The characters are usually filmed from the mid-chest up. The two-shot can show harmony or disharmony depending on the scene. In these examples from *The Piano*, Campion is able to use contrasting two-shots to deepen our knowledge of character.

### Film Example: *The Piano*

In *The Piano*, Ada (Holly Hunter) has arrived in New Zealand for an arranged marriage. Her young daughter accompanies her. The two have a symbiotic relationship. This is exaggerated as Hunter is mute and her daughter is accustomed to speaking for her.

#### Balanced Two-Shots

Campion exploits that aspect of the two-shot that can depict harmony. Whenever mother and daughter are in the same scene they most often appear in a balanced two-shot as they are in Images 1-3.

#### Imbalanced Two-Shots

When Campion shows Ada's marriage to her new husband she also uses a two-shot, the wedding photo seen in Image 4. Campion sabotages our expectations by using it to show the extent of the couple's disharmony. Ada looks away and her husband looks down as the rain pours down on the newlyweds. The image is imbalanced, and contrasts sharply with the harmonious shots of Ada and her daughter.

#### Dramatic Value

In having two people share one frame, the two-shot can suggest harmony or disharmony. By showing physical disharmony in the wedding photo, we immediately compare it to the conventional harmonious wedding shots we have seen. We also compare Ada's imbalanced wedding photo to the balanced shots with her daughter.

The comparisons are what enable the character reveals.

***The Piano* (1993) (Scene 28)**

Screenplay: Jane Campion, 4th draft, 1991. Refers to image 1-2.

Sc 28 EXT BAINES' DAY

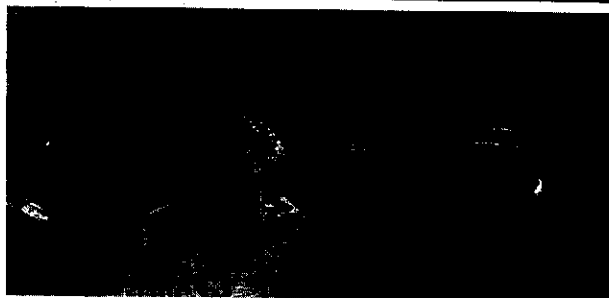
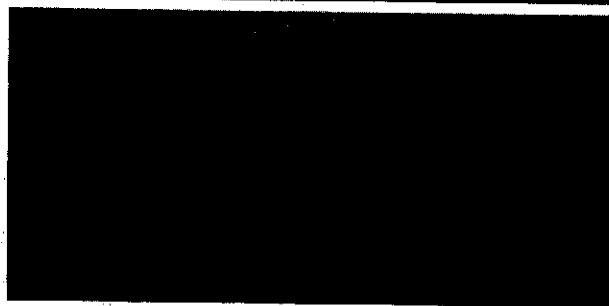
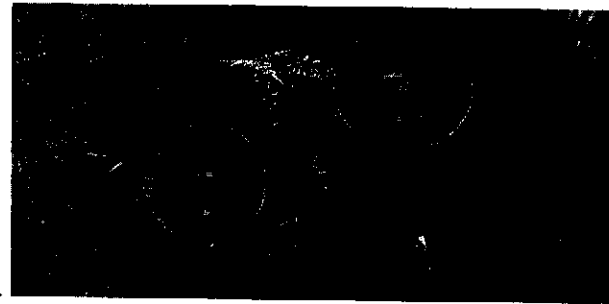
It is much later when BAINES emerges from his hut with a saddle over his arm. The two women are still there. ADA looks up at him expectantly.

FLORA mirrors her expression.

BAINES

I - can't - take - you there. I  
can't do it.

He puts the saddle over a rail. He continues to saddle up, sneaking glances at them from under the horse and around its side. They watch him closely, not pleadingly, but stubbornly, eerily of one mind.



TWO-SHOT

# EDITING: PUDOVKIN'S FIVE EDITING TECHNIQUES

## A Little Theory

Editing is the construction of scenes through the assembly of shots. In the 1920s when the great Russian theorists scoped out what the new elastic medium could do, they focused on the storytelling potential of editing.

## Five Editing Principles

In the 1920s Vsevolod Pudovkin set down five editing techniques that remain the foundation of modern day cutting. He named them as follows:

1. Contrast
2. Parallelism
3. Symbolism
4. Simultaneity
5. Leitmotif

For Pudovkin the purposeful use of editing could guide the audience's emotional response. Therefore he believed it was the job of both the writer and editor to master editing as their single most important job was the "psychological guidance" of the spectator." (Pudovkin 125)

Pudovkin's five principles show how editing choices can evoke specific audience emotions. As effective then as they are now, Pudovkin's principles are reproduced here as they appeared in *Film Theory and Criticism*, 4<sup>th</sup> edition (Eisenstein). Pudovkin first published his editing principles in his native Russian in 1926. Numbering was added for clarity.

Here's how Pudovkin explained his editing principles almost 100 years ago.

## On Editing

—V. Pudovkin 1926

1. *Contrast* — Suppose it be our task to tell of the miserable situation of a starving man; the story will impress the more vividly if associated with mention of the senseless gluttony of a well-to-do man.

On just such a simple contrast relation is based the corresponding editing method. On the screen the impression of this contrast is yet increased, for it is possible not only to relate the starving sequence to the gluttony sequence, but also to relate separate scenes and even separate shots of scenes to one another, thus, as it were, forcing the spectator to compare the two actions all the time, one strengthening the other. The editing of contrast is one of the most effective, but also one of the commonest and most standardised, of methods, and so care should be taken not to overdo it.

2. *Parallelism* — This method resembles contrast, but is considerably wider. Its substance can be explained more clearly by an example. In a scenario as yet unproduced a section occurs as follows: a working man, one of the leaders of a strike, is condemned to death; the execution is fixed for 5 a.m. The sequence is edited thus: a factory-owner, employer of the condemned man, is leaving a restaurant drunk, he looks at his wrist-watch: 4 o'clock. The accused is shown — he is being made ready to be led out. Again the manufacturer, he rings a door-bell to ask the time: 4:30. The prison wagon drives along the street under heavy guard. The maid who opens the door — the wife of the condemned — is subjected to a sudden senseless assault. The drunken factory-owner snores on a bed, his leg with trouser-end upturned, his hand hanging down with wrist-watch visible, the hands of the watch crawl slowly to 5 o'clock. The workman is being hanged. In this instance two thematically unconnected incidents develop in parallel by means of the watch that tells of the approaching execution. The watch on the wrist of the callous brute, as it were connects him

With the chief protagonist of the approaching tragic denouement, thus ever present in the consciousness of the spectator. This is undoubtedly an interesting method, capable of considerable development.

3. **Symbolism** — In the final scenes of the film *Strike* the shooting down of workmen is punctuated by shots of the slaughter of a bull in the stockyard. The scenarist, as it were, desires to say: just as a butcher fells a bull with the swing of a pole-axe, so cruelly and in cold blood, were shot down the workers. This method is especially interesting because, by means of editing, it introduces an abstract concept into the consciousness of the spectator without use of a title.

4. **Simultaneity** — In American films the final section is constructed from the simultaneous rapid development of two actions, in which the outcome of one depends on the outcome of the other. The end of the present-day section of *Intolerance*... is thus constructed. The whole aim of this method is to create in the spectator a maximum tension of excitement by the constant forcing of a question, such as, in this case: Will they be in time? — will they be in time?

The method is a purely emotional one, and nowadays overdone almost to the point of boredom, but it cannot be denied that of all the methods of constructing the end hitherto devised it is the most effective.

**Leit-motif (reiteration of theme)** — Often it is interesting for the scenarist especially to emphasise the basic theme of the scenario. For this purpose exists the method of reiteration. Its nature can easily be demonstrated by an example. In an anti-religious scenario that aimed at exposing the cruelty and hypocrisy of the Church in employ of the Tsarist regime, the same shot was several times repeated: a church-bell slowly ringing and, superimposed on it, the title: "The sound of bells sends into the world a message of patience and love." This piece appeared whenever the scenarist desired to emphasise the stupidity of patience, or the hypocrisy of the love thus preached.

—1926 (Pudovkin 125-6)

## Further Reading

1. Pudovkin, Vsevolod. *Film Technique and Film Acting*, 1926. New York: Grove Press, 1970.
2. Eisenstein, Sergei. *Film Form: Essays in Film Theory*. Edited and translated by Jay Leyda. New York: Harcourt Brace & Co., 1949 (1977).
3. Kuleshov, Lev. *Kuleshov on Film, 1922-1968*. Selected, translated and edited with an introduction by Ronald Levaco. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1974.
4. Mast, Gerald, Marshall Cohen and Leo Brady, eds. *Film Theory and Criticism: Introductory Readings*. 4<sup>th</sup> Edition. London: Oxford University Press, 1992.

## Editing: Additional Techniques

By the end of the 1920s the basics of scene construction had been laid down. Pudovkin along with Sergei Eisenstein, D.W. Griffith, and Fritz Lang had so successfully advanced the craft that much of what followed were variations of their basic techniques.

In the same way that modern day editing is a footnote to these early pioneers, many of their inventions have been attributed to 19th century novelists. Eisenstein, for example, credited much of Griffith's early innovations like progressive montage, intercutting, the close-up and even the dissolve to the novels of Charles Dickens (Eisenstein 398). What these early theorists did was create film equivalents for proven literary forms while, at the same time, mining the new medium for yet undiscovered techniques.

Here is a representative selection of the staple editing techniques used by contemporary filmmakers.

## Film Elements

- |                   |                     |                  |                         |
|-------------------|---------------------|------------------|-------------------------|
| 17. Montage       | <i>Citizen Kane</i> | 22. Split Screen | <i>Kill Bill Vol. 1</i> |
| 18. Montage       | <i>Adaptation</i>   | 23. Dissolves    | <i>Citizen Kane</i>     |
| 19. Assembly      | <i>Psycho</i>       | 24. Dissolves    | <i>Barton Fink</i>      |
| 20. Mise-en-scène | <i>Psycho</i>       | 25. Smash Cut    | <i>American Beauty</i>  |
| 21. Intercutting  | <i>Cabaret</i>      |                  |                         |

## 19. Film Element: Assembly

Assembly editing is a term that Alfred Hitchcock used in referring to the kind of editing used in *Psycho*'s shower scene. In this case assembly means the creative construction of a scene through the assembly of separate pieces of film. The resulting scene being a kind of mosaic of shots producing a larger idea.

### Film Example: *Psycho*

Cutting, as Hitchcock said in his 1959 televised interview for the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, is a kind of severance (Hitchcock). It is also a kind of assembly.

In *Psycho*, Hitchcock intentionally differentiates the film's two murders by editing choices.

#### Shower Scene

In the shower scene, Hitchcock's purpose is to first shock us with the event of a murder and then horrify us with its brutality. In a rapid succession of cuts, 78 in 45 seconds, Hitchcock takes us past the shower curtain into the stall giving us the POV of the murderer. It's almost as though Hitchcock's exaggerated use of cutting intentionally refers back to the cutting of the victim.

#### Stairwell Scene

The second murder is shot and edited entirely differently. The focus is not on the brutality of the murderer, as we have already seen that. The focus is on whether or not the victim will be killed. Consequently, it's a suspense scene with our attention directed on the minutes preceding the murder, not the murder. In the second murder, the shots are long takes. Once the audience and the victim realize that the victim is about to be killed, the scene is over. Despite the fact that the methods of both murders were identical, the editing generates two entirely different emotional responses.

### Dramatic Value

Editing can guide the emotional response of the viewer by choosing how to parcel out the event in shots over time.

### Script Note

The script excerpt from the "shower scene" is included to show how highly stylized editing can be suggested without disrupting the mounting suspense.

### Other Films

*Metropolis* (dream sequence)

## Psycho (1960) (Shower Scene)

Screenplay: Joseph Stephano. Revised Draft, Dec. 1, 1959.

Novel: Robert Bloch.

### MARY IN SHOWER

Over the bar on which hangs the shower curtain, we can see the bathroom door not entirely closed. For a moment we watch Mary as she washes and dries herself.

There is still a small worry in her eyes, but generally she looks somewhat relieved.

We see the bathroom door being pushed slowly open.

The noise of the shower drowns out any sound. The door is then slowly and carefully closed.

We see the shadow of a woman fall across the shower curtain. Mary's head is turned to the curtain. The white brightness of the bathroom is almost blinding.

Suddenly we see the hand reach up, grasp the shower curtain, rip it aside.

CUT TO:

### ECU

She turns in response to the feel and SOUND of the shower curtain being torn aside. A look of pure horror erupts in her face. A low, audible groan begins to rise up out of her throat. A hand comes into the shot. The hand holds an enormous bread knife. The flint of the blade reflects the screen to an almost total, silver blankness.

### SLASHING

Impression of a knife slashing, as if tearing at the very screen, tearing the film. Over it the brief gulps of screaming. And then silence. Then the dreadful thump as Mary's body falls in the tub.

### LOW ANGLE

Blank whiteness, the blur of the shower water, the hand pulling the shower curtain back. We catch one flicker of a glimpse of the murderer.

A man, her face contorted with madness, her head wild with hair, as if she were wearing a fright-wig. And then we see only the curtain, closed across the tub, and hear the rush of the shower water. Above the shower bar we see the bathroom door open again and after a moment we HEAR the SOUND of the front door slamming.

CUT TO:

### HEAD BODY

Half in, half out of the tub, the head tumbled over, touching the floor, the hair wet, one eye wide open as if popped, one arm lying limp and wet along the tile floor. Coming down the side of the tub, running thick and dark along the porcelain, we see many small threads of blood.

A FOLLOWS away from the body, travels slowly across the bathroom, past the toilet, out into the bedroom. As CAMERA approaches the bed, we see the folded newspaper as Mary placed it on the bedside table.

1.

2.

3.

4.

5.

6.

7.

8.

## 20. Film Element: *Mise-en-Scène*

*Mise-en-scène* is a French term meaning “putting in the scene,” originally used to describe the physical production of the film. Today, however, *mise-en-scène* refers to a scene in which the action plays out in front of a continually running camera. New compositions are created through blocking, lens zooms and camera movement instead of cutting. The scene is shot in real time as one uninterrupted take that will stand on its own without the aid of editing.

### Film Example: *Psycho* (Shower Scene Aftermath)

Right after *Psycho*'s shower scene, the cutting changes to *mise-en-scène*. Now we see Norman rushing from his mother's house to the cabin where Marion was killed. Once inside, the camera moves with Norman as he paces back and forth thinking about what to do with the body. When Norman enters another cabin to retrieve janitorial supplies, the camera continues to roll outside the door, until he returns with a mop and a bucket. When Norman re-enters the cabin we watch in real time as Norman drags the body onto the plastic sheeting. This is followed by Norman mopping out the tub and finally driving off with the body. Hitchcock's switch to *mise-en-scène* achieves a number of things.

### Dramatic Value

Where the rapid assembly editing of the shower scene appeared constructed to add chaos and disorient, the *mise-en-scène* shots in the aftermath scene appear to return us to normalcy. The shots are long, smooth takes that pool out slowly in real time. However, the content sabotages any sense of relief. Seeing Norman carefully smooth out the plastic sheeting readying it for Marion's body, then sloshing her blood around the tub with a janitor's mop only serves to sustain our revulsion. We are supposed to feel soothed by the return to normalcy, but instead it heightens our fears.

### Script Note

Take a look at how effortlessly the script exploits editing technique but does not call attention to technical details.

### Other Films Using *Mise-en-Scène* Shots

*Rope* (entire film)

*Touch of Evil* (opening)

*The Player* (opening)

*The 400 Blows* (many shots throughout)

### Historical Note

Hitchcock filmed *Rope* (1948) as one continuous *mise-en-scène* shot. The only breaks in filming occurred when he stopped for necessary magazine changes.



**Psycho (1960) (Shower Scene Aftermath)**

Screenplay: Joseph Stefano. Revised Draft, Dec. 1, 1959.

Novel: Robert Bloch.

EXT. THE PATH - (NIGHT)

Norman is coming AT CAMERA, running head-on. He dashes into an extreme close up and we see the terror and fear ripe in his face. CAMERA PANS as Norman races past, holds as Norman runs to the porch and quickly along it and directly to Mary's room.

INT. MARY'S CABIN - (NIGHT)

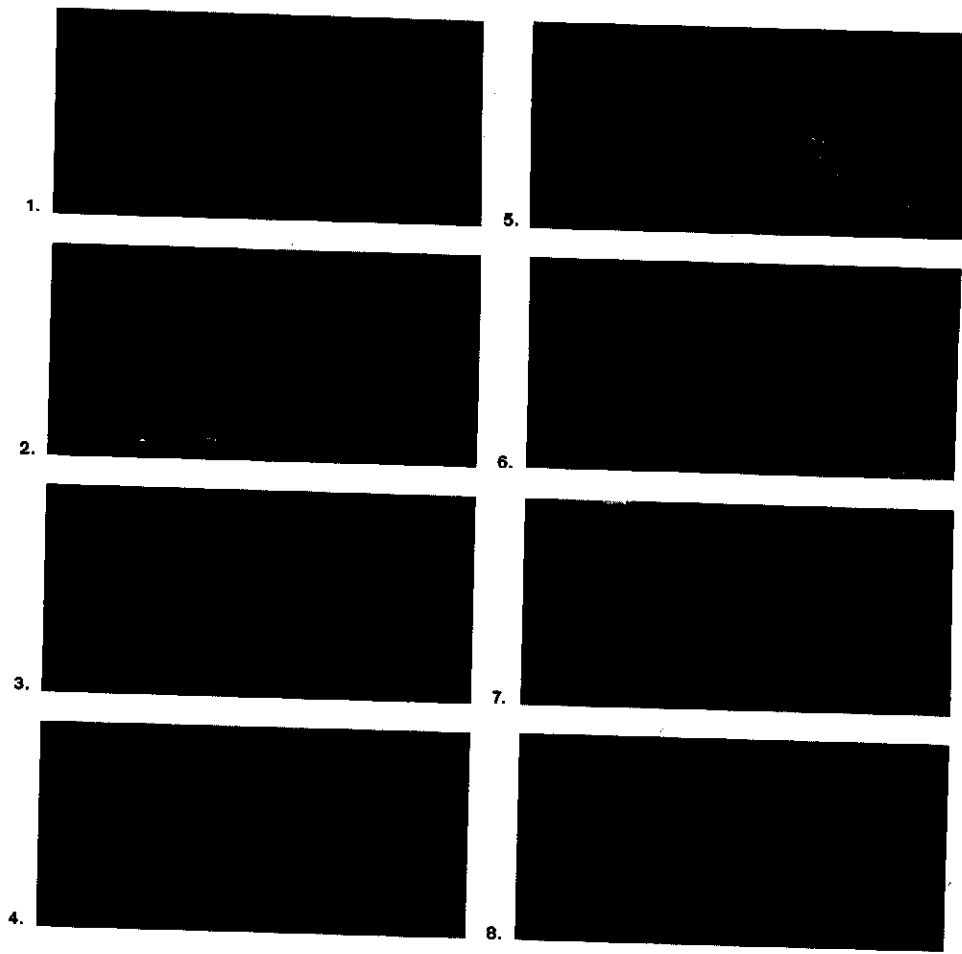
Norman pauses a moment in the doorway, glances about the room, hears the shower going, sees the bathroom door is open. He goes to the bathroom, looks in, sees the body.

Slowly, almost carefully, he raises his hands to his face, covers his eyes, turns his face away. Then he crosses to the window, looks out at the house. Shot is so angled that we see the bedside table with the newspaper on it.

After a moment, Norman moves from the window, sinks onto the edge of the bed.

FRESH ANGLE - BEHIND NORMAN

Norman sitting on bed, the bathroom in b.g. of shot. We can see only the hand of the dead girl, lying along the tile floor.



## 26. Film Element: Expanding Time through Pacing

As audiences we expect time to spool out as we experience it. Disrupting the audience's expectation provides a creative opportunity. Altering time can be done in a number of ways. In the following example, taken from *Barton Fink*, pacing is used to slow down time and externalize the protagonist's anxiety about his new environment.

### Film Example: *Barton Fink*

The Hotel Earle is the strange new home for recently arrived New York playwright, Barton Fink. The Coen brothers use the hotel to externalize Barton's discomfort in his new L.A. environment.

In the script pages that follow Barton, who is already ill at ease after registering with Chet, now enters the hotel elevator. Once inside the elevator, it's as though Barton has entered a parallel universe. Every action the elevator man makes is noticeably delayed. It's as though the elevator man lives in a different time zone where minutes and hours are generated from a different clock.

### Dramatic Value

This technique suggests that the world is disjointed and somehow off-kilter. It adds suspense without dialog, leaving the audience to fear what might lie ahead. It also suggests that the time alteration might not be real, just a projection of Barton's own anxiety. This helps to further represent Barton's inner turmoil. Changing pacing within a scene serves to separate a scene into distinct parts and/or characters into distinct worlds.

**Barton Fink (1991) (Act 1, Page 12)**

Screenplay: Joel Coen & Ethan Coen, Feb. 19, 1990.

Barton is walking to the elevator.

ELEVATOR

Barton enters and sets down his bags.

An aged man with white stubble, wearing a greasy maroon uniform, sits on a stool facing the call panel. He does not acknowledge Barton's presence.

After a beat:

BARTON

... Six, please.

The elevator man gets slowly to his feet. As he pushes the door closed:

ELEVATOR MAN

Next stop: Six.

1.

2.

3.

## 27. Film Element: Contrast of Time (Pacing and Intercutting)

By intercutting two separate scenes, a number of dramatic effects can be created. For example, comparison is the product of intercutting in *Thelma and Louise's* introductory scene where the career choices of Thelma and Louise are established. Later their character differences are further externalized when we cut back and forth as the two women pack.

Intercutting can also be used to quicken the pace and heighten suspense. Here's an example from *Pulp Fiction's* prelude to its "adrenalin shot" scene.

### **Film Example: *Pulp Fiction***

*Setup:* Vince races to his drug dealer's house terrified that Mia, his boss's wife, is going to O.D. in the front seat of his car.

*Conflict:* Vince desperately needs his drug dealer's help. But Lance, the drug dealer, thwarts Vince at every turn.

#### **Vince's Shots**

Vince spins into the scene driving his car toward the camera.

From here on Vince is seen in a tight close-up. His head fills the frame. He looks screen left and never changes his position. He looks like an unstoppable missile.

We then cut to Lance's house, where Lance, the slightly stoned drug dealer, munches on breakfast cereal while laughing at an old slap-stick comedy on TV.

#### **Lance's Shots**

Lance's shots are wide and loose and initially *mise-en-scène*. Lance's lackadaisical manner, coupled with his slovenly living room, makes the scene feel unfocused. Lance moves slowly in his bathrobe toward the phone. The wide shots and slow moments peak the suspense. Lance's slightly stoned manner and his combative nature further heighten the suspense.

We then cut back and forth between the two locations.

#### **Dramatic Value**

Each time we cut to Lance's house Vince hopes for the right answer, but each time he is stalled by the visuals and Lance's reaction. This makes Vince more desperate, and Lance more combative. Lance's shots are long and the results and their outcome unproductive. Vince's shots are quick and tight, and visually commanding. The dramatic value of the intercutting is used here to step-up the suspense. Notice that the suspense is also augmented by other techniques like contrast in movement, length of shots, and camera angles.

## Pulp Fiction (1994)

Screenplay: Quentin Tarantino, May 1993.

Stories by: Quentin Tarantino & Roger Roberts Avary

INT. LANCE'S HOUSE - NIGHT

At this late hour, Lance has transformed from a bon vivant drug dealer to a bathrobe creature.

He sits in a big comfy chair, ratty blue gym pants, a worn-out but comfortable tee-shirt that has, written on it, "TAFT, CALIFORNIA," and a moth-ridden terry cloth robe. In his hand is a bowl of Cap'n Crunch with Crunch Berries. In front of him on the coffee table is a jug of milk, the box the Cap'n Crunch with Crunch Berries came out of, and a hash pipe in an ashtray.

On the big-screen TV in front of the table is the Three Stooges, and they're getting married.

PREACHER (EMIL SIMKUS)  
(on TV)

Hold hands, you love birds.

The phone RINGS.

Lance puts down his cereal and makes his way to the phone.

The phone RINGS again.

Jody, his wife, CALLS from the bedroom, obviously woken up.

JODY (OS)

Lance! The phone's ringing!

LANCE

(calling back)

I can hear it!

JODY (OS)

I thought you told those fuckin' assholes never to call this late!

LANCE

(by the phone)

I told 'em and that's what I'm gonna tell this fuckin' asshole right now!

(he answers the phone)

Hello, do you know how late it is? You're not supposed to be callin' me this fuckin' late.

CUT TO VINCENT IN THE MALIBU

Vincent is still driving like a stripe-assed ape, clutching the phone to his ear. WE CUT BACK AND FORTH during the conversation.



1.



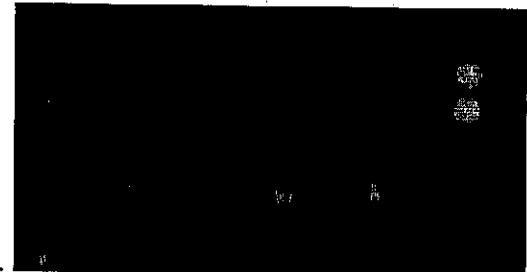
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3.



4.



5.



6.

CONTRAST OF TIME

# SOUND EFFECTS

## Introduction

Outside of the musical score, movies rely on three kinds of sound to tell their stories:

Dialog

Voiceover

Sound Effects

## Sound Effects and the Writer

While voiceover and dialog are well understood to be writers' tools, few screenwriters approach sound effects with the same certainty. Yet sound effects are as much the purview of the writer as are visual symbols. In the same way a writer can create an extended visual metaphor, sound effects can also suggest an extended aural metaphor. They can add layers of meaning to a film that are hard to achieve in other ways.

Sound effects can be obvious or quite subtle. They can intentionally draw attention to themselves, or manipulate with stealth. They can expose, disguise, suggest, establish, or reveal. They can also be tagged to specific events or characters.

## Kinds of Sound Effects

Sound that is organic to a scene is often called *diegetic* sound. These sound effects can be realistic or altered for effect. External sound effects, those not logically heard in the scene, can also be added for dramatic value. These external sound effects, that is, those not part of the story world, are called *non-diegetic*.

For our purposes we can divide sound effects into four categories as follows.

### *Realistic*

This is any sound effect that one could naturally expect to hear if situated in the filmed scene. The source of the sound might be on screen or off screen. Adding the most common sound effects like a car honking, a metronome, or a buzzing mosquito can greatly change the feeling of a scene.

### *Expressive*

For our purposes an expressive sound effect is one that is realistic, but has been altered. This might mean that a phone's ring starts out normally and suddenly gets louder and louder. The sound comes from the scene but has been manipulated for effect.

### *Surreal*

Sound effects are often enlisted to externalize a character's inner thoughts, nightmares, hallucinations, dreams, or wishes. We might hear, for example, the laughter of a child as a woman picks up a doll from childhood. This gives the scene a surreal feeling. This effect is often called *meta-diegetic*.

### *External*

This is a sound effect that clearly does not come from the scene. It is an effect that is not heard or responded to by the characters. For example, if a character is making his last walk down death row, and slowly the audience hears a church bell, and we know there is no church for miles, we consider this sound external to the story world. The purpose of the sound effect is to signal the audience to the meaning of the scene. This kind of effect is known as *non-diegetic*.

Although the sound editors contribute the bulk of these effects in most movies, a writer can suggest an aural metaphor or the tone of the audio world. These effects should be used sparingly and should not dominate the writing. The director might add to these ideas or alter them as he or she would do with any other part of the script. However, when used purposefully they are as potent a storytelling tool as a movie's dialog or visuals.

Here are some ideas to consider when thinking about the use of sound effects:

- they can be used as an important “prop” or plot point
- sound and picture don't have to match
- realistic sound can be altered to behave expressively
- sound effects can be used to express internal thoughts of characters
- they can be used as a character's signature, or remind us of an event.
- they can be entirely external to the scene
- two sound effects, like a match cut in picture, can be placed side by side and generate an entirely new third idea (see Audio Transitions).

Here are the examples we will look at in this section:

### **Film Elements**

- |   |                    |
|---|--------------------|
| 35. Realistic Sound (Diegetic) (Character)          | <i>Klute</i>       |
| 36. Realistic Sound (Diegetic) (Emotional Response) | <i>ET</i>          |
| 37. Expressive Sound (Diegetic) (Outer World)       | <i>Barton Fink</i> |
| 38. Surreal Sound (Meta-Diegetic) (Inner World)     | <i>Barton Fink</i> |

### **38. Film Element: Surreal Sound (Meta-Diegetic) (Inner World)**

Meta-diegetic is any sound that represents a character's inner world, such as nightmares, dreams, hallucinations, wishes, and so on. In this scene from *Barton Fink*, it appears that Barton is transferring an inner wish onto the scene depicted in a postcard.

#### **Film Example: *Barton Fink***

When Barton enters his room at the Hotel Earle, he enters guardedly. His anxiety has already been set off in registering downstairs with Chet. As Barton enters his room, his anxiety is further heightened. Everything in the room, like the lobby, seems to be off kilter. The bed squeaks louder than expected, the windows don't open, and the wall paper oozes a gooey syrup, appearing almost organic.

Then Barton notices a postcard tacked to the wall. It's an iconic image of a California girl sunbathing on the beach.

Barton focuses on the postcard. Now we hear gulls and waves crashing. It is as though we have been transplanted to the beach. From the context and sound effects, we assume that Barton is projecting some kind of inner wish onto the scene.

When the phone rings, the audio returns to normal, signaling the daydream is over.

#### **Dramatic Value**

Once you cross the threshold and accept that sound does not need to be rooted in reality, that sound can be pulled from anywhere in expressing a character's thoughts, a huge creative door opens. The example, taken from *Barton Fink*, underscores that sound and picture do not need to match. In fact it's the mismatch that gives the scene heightened interest by suggesting we are hearing Barton's inner thoughts.



**Barton Fink (1991)**

Screenplay: Joel Coen & Ethan Coen, Feb. 19, 1990.

HIS ROOM

As Barton enters.

The room is small and cheaply furnished. There is a lumpy bed with a worn-yellow coverlet, an old secretary table, and a wooden luggage stand.

As Barton crosses the room we follow to reveal a sink and wash basin, a house telephone on a rickety night stand, and a window with yellowing sheers looking on an air shaft.

Barton throws his valise onto the bed where it sinks, jittering. He shrugs off his jacket.

Pips of sweat stand out on Barton's brow. The room is hot.

He walks across the room, switches on an oscillating fan and struggles to throw open the window. After he strains at it for a moment, it slides open with a great wrenching sound.

Barton picks up his Underwood and places it on the secretary table. He gives the machine a casually affectionate pat.

Next to the typewriter are a few sheets of house stationery:  
THE HOTEL EARLE: A DAY OR A LIFETIME.

We pan up to a picture in a cheap wooden frame on the wall above the desk.

A bathing beauty sits on the beach under a cobalt blue sky. One hand shields her eyes from the sun as she looks out at a crashing surf.

The sound of the surf mixes up.

BARTON

Looking at the picture

TRACKING IN ON THE PICTURE

The surf mixes up louder. We hear a gull cry.

The sound snaps off with the ring of a telephone.

NON-DIEGETIC

## 47. Film Element: Visual Match-Cut (Action)

A *match-cut on action* means that the visuals of one scene are matched with the visuals in the next through similarity of action. In this case the match-cut on action conveys time compression.

### Film Example: *2001: A Space Odyssey*

*2001: A Space Odyssey* opens with a spectacular sequence depicting the evolutionary stages of mankind.

#### Shot 1

The last image of the sequence shows a prehistoric man toss a bone into the air.

#### Shot 2

The spinning bone (action) is matched in the next scene with a moving space ship (action).

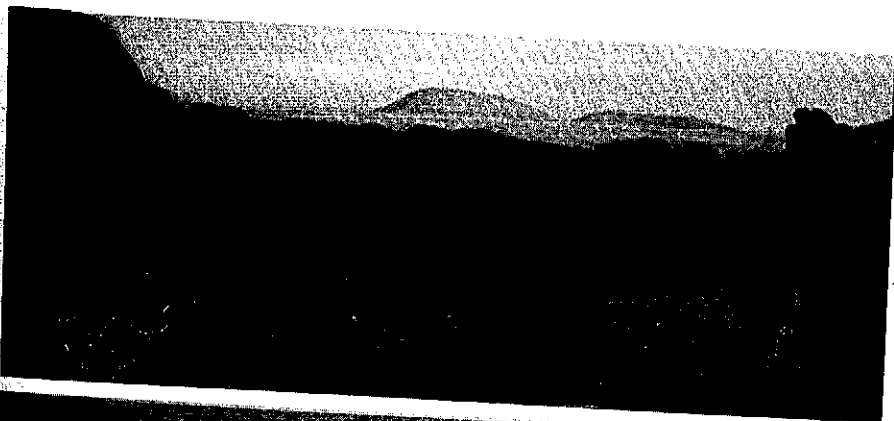
In a single match-cut we travel from prehistoric man to the space era. It's a spectacular use of a match-cut on action.

### Dramatic Value

Time compression through a flashforward that is achieved through a match-cut on action.

### Other Films

*All That Jazz*. By cutting on action several dancers are made to appear as one. Each new dancer is shot alone on stage auditioning. Each cut shows a new dancer in exactly the same spot and continuing the motion of the previous dancer. Here the match-cut on action suggests both the passage of time and the interchangeability of dancers.



6.