

FILM STUDIES

An Introduction

Ed Sikov

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CHAPTER 4

EDITING: FROM SHOT TO SHOT

TRANSITIONS

With all but a very few exceptions, films—especially narrative feature films—are made up of a series of individual shots that filmmakers connect in a formal, systematic, and expressive way. There are practical as well as artistic reasons for directors to assemble movies from many hundreds if not thousands of shots. For one thing, film cameras are able to hold only a limited amount of celluloid film—not enough for a feature-length motion picture. (Digital cameras, however, can capture multiple hours.) More important, narrative films generally compress time considerably by leaving out the boring parts of the stories they tell. Imagine how dull it would be to watch even the most intriguing characters go through the humdrum motions of everyday life—doing the laundry, brushing their teeth, spending an hour stuck in traffic—simply because the filmmaker had no way of eliminating these necessary but irrelevant activities. Even those rare films that try to duplicate real time—the story of two hours in a woman’s life could conceivably take exactly two hours to tell on film—generally require the filmmaker to carve up the action into discrete shots and reassemble them coherently, if only to hold the audience’s visual interest, let alone to make expressive points by way of close-ups, long shots, high- and low-angle shots, and so on.



FIGURE 4.1 Editors work manually at an editing table in this undated photograph. Now, most editing takes place on computers. (Photofest)

Alfred Hitchcock's 1948 film, *Rope*, is an attempt to film an entire feature-length narrative in a single shot. The fact that film *magazines* (lightproof containers that hold, feed, and take up film in the camera) of that era could only hold about ten minutes of film was a big constraint, but Hitchcock uses two devices to mask the technically necessary edits: he makes straight cuts at certain reel changeovers and tracks forward into the backs of men wearing dark suits in order to black out the image before cutting at certain others. Still, by moving the camera and reframing the image within these 5- to 10-

minute shots, Hitchcock effectively carves each shot into discrete units for expressive purposes.

This chapter describes the methods by which filmmakers link individual shots to one another in a process called **EDITING**, or **CUTTING**. These links are broadly called **TRANSITIONS**.

The simplest transition is the **CUT**. A director films a shot, the basic unit of filmmaking, and has it developed. She films another shot and has it developed as well. She trims each shot down to the length she wants, and she attaches the two strips of film together with a piece of tape. That's it: she has *cut* from one shot to another. In this example, the filmmaker is using celluloid. She can create the same effect electronically with two shots taken in video, though in that case, of course, she has no need for tape.

Bear in mind that editing is a human activity. Unlike the camera's mechanical recording of images, editing is quite specifically a matter of active decision-making—the product of human choice. So when describing editing, it makes no sense to say or write “the camera cuts.” Cameras can only record; directors and editors cut.

Other important transitions include the **FADE-IN** and **FADE-OUT**; the **IRIS-IN** and **IRIS-OUT**; the **DISSOLVE**, and the **WIPE**, but because these effects are used mostly as transitions from scene to scene—in other words, from the final shot of one scene to the first shot of the next scene—and this chapter concerns transitions from shot to shot *within* a scene, let's postpone describing them until [chapter 6](#).

MONTAGE

One of the key terms in film studies is **MONTAGE**. Taken from the French verb *monter*, meaning *to assemble*, montage describes the various ways in which filmmakers string individual shots together to form a series.

The term *montage* has three different but related definitions. The first definition is the easiest. In France, the word *montage* simply means editing—*any kind of editing*. As described in the example of a simple cut, above, the filmmaker takes two pieces of exposed and processed celluloid, trims them down to the length she wants—

decisions made on the basis of the expressive and/or graphic content of the image, or the dialogue, or a combination of both—and literally tapes them together. In France, what she has done is known as *montage*.

In the United States, the term *montage* refers more specifically to a *film sequence that relies on editing to condense or expand action, space, or time*. The effect is often that of a rapid-fire series of interrelated images. Imagine that a director is telling the story of a rock band that forms in Omaha, and he needs to move them quickly to Hollywood, where they will perform live on a television show. Since there is neither the need nor the time to watch the group drive the entire way from eastern Nebraska to southern California, our director begins by filming a shot of the band members packing up their van in Omaha; he cuts quickly from this shot to a shot of the van on the interstate making its way across the Great Plains. From this he cuts to a shot of oil derricks next to the highway, then to a shot of cattle in a field, and then to a shot of the van heading toward the snowcapped Rockies. Cut to a shot of the band members in the van; cut to a shot of the van driving down the Las Vegas Strip at night. An image of Death Valley follows. From the desert the director cuts to a shot of a sign reading “Los Angeles—30 miles” and then to a shot of the van pulling up at an office building on Sunset Boulevard.

In this American-style montage sequence, the band has moved all the way from the Midwest to L.A. in less than a minute. This montage condenses time and space—a 1,700-mile trip that would take several days in real time shrinks down in screen time to about 45 seconds.

Here's an example of the way in which an American-style montage can *expand* time and space: Imagine a pitcher on the mound of a baseball field preparing to fire a fastball to the catcher. But instead of presenting the pitch in one single shot taken from high in the stands, the director assembles an American-style montage sequence in order to enhance the game's suspense: a full shot of the pitcher winding up; a long shot of the crowd in the bleachers; a medium shot of the manager looking tense in the dugout; another

shot of the pitcher, this one a close-up, a moment later in his windup; a shot of a middle-aged guy watching the game on television in his den; a long shot of a group of fans beginning to stand up; a medium shot of the batter looking defiant; a close-up of the ball leaving the pitcher's fist; a full shot of the batter beginning to swing; a shot of the ball hurtling across the screen ... None of these shots needs to be in slow motion for real time to be stretched out in reel time by virtue of montage. By assembling an American-style montage in this manner, the filmmaker has expanded an action that would take only a few seconds in real time into a 60-second montage.

There's a third definition of montage, and it is the most complicated to describe and comprehend. In the Soviet cinema of the immediate post-Revolutionary period—which is to say the twentieth century's late 'teens and '20s—filmmakers conducted a fierce debate about the nature and effects of montage. Soviet filmmakers were excited by the 1917 Marxist revolution that sought to transform their country from a feudal state to a modern industrial empire overnight, and they wanted to find ways of expressing this political energy on film. The key filmmakers involved in this blend of polemical debate and cinematic practice were **Sergei Eisenstein**, **Vsevolod Pudovkin**, and **Dziga Vertov**. Pudovkin believed that shots were like bricks that were carefully placed, one by one, to form a kind of cinematic wall, and that montage was effectively the cement that held them together; the resulting film, like a wall, was more meaningful than the simple sum of its bricklike parts *because montage added meaning to the individual shots' content*. Vertov, being essentially a documentarian, was not interested in the narrative cohesion montage could produce; his most famous film, *Man with a Movie Camera* (1929), is a kaleidoscopic assemblage of shots put together with the attitude of a symphonic musician rather than a storyteller.

For Eisenstein, montage meant a kind of *dynamic editing used both to expose and explore the dialectics, or oppositional conflicts, of a given situation, and to create in the mind of the viewer a revolutionary synthesis*. The most famous example of Soviet-style montage in film history, in fact, is the "Odessa Steps" sequence from

Eisenstein's *Battleship Potemkin* (1925). The situation Eisenstein depicts is a fictional re-creation of the 1905 uprising of sailors on the eponymous battleship; they mutinied against the harsh czarist government and received a strong measure of popular support from the people of Odessa, who in the sequence in question have gathered on the city steps to voice their solidarity with the sailors. The czar's soldiers march down the flight of steps and begin firing their guns at the citizens. Not only does Eisenstein edit this sequence of shots very rapidly in order to intensify the sense of conflict between the monarchy and the people, but the compositions within each shot are themselves full of conflict—strong contrasts of lights and darks, lots of diagonal vectors, and so on. There is nothing static about this sequence—not in its editing, not in its individual shots. It is the classic Soviet-style montage.

For Eisenstein, shots were meant to *collide*; his style of montage was the opposite of smooth, apparently seamless [continuity editing](#) (which is defined below). And his goal was to create in the minds of his audience a revolutionary synthesis of all these conflicts—to encourage the viewer, through montage, to *think* and see in a new and, he hoped, radical way. By editing these conflict-filled shots together in a way that intensifies conflict rather than smoothing it over, Eisenstein hoped to inspire in his audiences a kind of revolutionary thinking. For him, the creative act was not only that of the filmmaker who shoots and assembles the film. An equally creative act is performed by those of us who see the film; we take in all of these images by way of montage and consequently put the pieces together in our own minds in our own ways.



FIGURE 4.2 Four images from the “Odessa Steps” sequence, *Battleship Potemkin* (1925) (frame enlargements).

What links all of these definitions of *montage* is not only the splicing together of individual shots. What makes *montage* worthy of study in any of its three forms and definitions is that it is a fundamentally creative act—the product of artistic decision-making. As the French film theorist André Bazin once wrote, montage yields “the creation of a sense or meaning not proper to the images themselves but derived exclusively from their juxtaposition.” As the rest of the chapter will make clear, editing compounds information and creates evocative associations that form a cornerstone of any film’s expressive meaning.

THE KULESHOV EXPERIMENT

Film studies illustrates editing’s ability to create new associations and ideas in the viewer’s mind with another example from Soviet cinema—an apolitical example, but one that still neatly describes the way Soviet filmmakers viewed montage as imaginative and dynamic. By splicing together snippets of photographed reality, these

filmmakers understood that something new was being created—something that didn't exist on a brute material plane but *did* exist in the minds of a movie audience—and *only* in those minds. The film director and theorist **Lev Kuleshov** is said to have conducted an experiment involving the effects of montage on an audience's perception of emotion. He filmed the great Russian actor **Ivan Mozhukin** in medium close-up, with a sincere-looking but neutral expression on his face. Kuleshov then filmed a shot of a bowl of soup, a shot of a coffin, and a shot of a little girl playing. [Figure 4.3](#) shows how Kuleshov edited the sequence.

Audiences are said to have marveled at the great actor's extraordinary range and subtle technique. Mozhukin could express great hunger! Mozhukin could express extraordinary grief! Mozhukin could express exactly the kind of pride and joy a parent feels when watching his child at play! *What a great actor!*

In fact, of course, it was the same shot of Mozhukin, and he wasn't expressing anything other than neutrality. It was the audience members who provided the emotional content of the sequence simply by making associations in their own minds from one shot to the next.

One of the underappreciated aspects of Kuleshov's experiment is that Kuleshov didn't just create emotional content by way of editing. He also defined and constructed three continuous but distinct spaces: Mozhukin and the bowl of soup in one, Mozhukin and the coffin in the second, Mozhukin and the child in the third. The actor was seen as being in the same place as the soup bowl; the same place as the coffin; and the same place as the little girl—spaces created solely by way of editing.

The dirty little secret of the Kuleshov experiment is the fact that nobody is on record as ever having seen the film itself. In point of fact, Kuleshov may never have screened or even filmed the sequence. But then he didn't have to. He knew it would work.

CONTINUITY EDITING

Classical Hollywood style, which film studies defines as the set of predominant formal techniques used by most American narrative filmmakers through the twentieth century and to the present day, relies on several editing principles to achieve its central goal: to keep audience members so wrapped up in the fictional world created onscreen that they cease to be conscious of watching a movie and, instead, believe that they are witnessing something real. Whether it's a romance between two believable characters or an action film with a larger-than-life hero or a horror film featuring a preposterous monster, classical Hollywood films want us to believe that we are watching reality, if only for the duration of the picture.



FIGURE 4.3 The Kuleshov experiment created three distinct screen spaces as well as narrative relationships.

For example, have you ever noticed that film characters rarely turn and look precisely at the camera and speak directly to you in the audience? Although direct addresses from characters to audiences have happened from time to time—*Annie Hall* (1977) and *Wayne's*

World (1992) contain notable examples of this violation of formal convention—it's startling when it occurs precisely because it occurs so rarely. The effect of such direct addresses is to jolt us out of our dreamlike immersion in the film's story into a sudden awareness of the film's artificiality: we know we weren't there when the movie was being filmed, and we know that the character isn't really talking to *us* at all. This jolt makes us aware that we're watching a movie.

Classical Hollywood style strives to avoid calling attention to the means and forms of its own construction. Through strictly formal techniques, Hollywood films attempt to smooth over the many cuts that occur. They try to maintain a sense of spatial unity within each individual sequence. They attempt, to use loftier critical discourse, *to efface themselves*—to render themselves unnoticeable. The overall term that describes this formal system is **CONTINUITY EDITING**, also known as **INVISIBLE EDITING**. Continuity editing is *a set of editing practices that establish spatial and/or temporal continuity between shots*—in other words, any of the various techniques that filmmakers employ to keep their narratives moving forward logically and smoothly, without jarring disruptions in space or time, and without making the audience aware that they are in fact watching a work of art. Continuity editing strives not only to keep disruptions to a minimum but to *actively promote a sense of narrative and spatial coherence and stability in the face of hundreds or even thousands of the discrete bits of celluloid called shots*. What are these techniques?

The first set of continuity editing techniques involve ways to downplay the jarring effect of cutting. They are called **editing matches**. There are three essential ways of **matching** one shot to another, and they are defined according to how the match is made.

1. **Matching on action**
2. Eye-line matching
3. **Graphic matching**

MATCHING ON ACTION occurs when a piece of physical action in the first shot continues in the second shot. Here's a simple example: In

the first shot, a character opens a door; in the second shot, she goes through the doorway. Her movement provides the continuity that matches the two shots. If the shots are set up well and the editor knows his stuff, the audience will slide visually from the first shot to the second, thanks to the seemingly continuous, apparently uninterrupted movement of the character through the doorway.

Let's use another baseball game as a more complicated example. The pitcher throws a pitch in Shot 1: we see him hurl the ball from the right side of the screen to the left. In Shot 2, the ball flies into the image from ... which side? Yes, from the right side of the screen to the left. This makes it appear that it's the same ball pitched by the same pitcher at the same time. How odd and disruptive it would be if the ball flew from the pitcher's mound to home plate in one direction in the first shot and entered the succeeding shot from the opposite direction. It would make no sense visually. An experimental filmmaker may choose to create such a disruptive effect, but most narrative filmmakers seek to avoid that kind of visual illogic.

Now the batter takes a swing and connects: it's a line drive, and the ball goes flying out of the image on the ... right. When the ball reenters the image in the next shot—the second baseman is waiting for it—where does it enter the image and in which direction is it traveling? ¹

EYE-LINE MATCHING works on a similar principle, but instead of using the direction of a physical action to determine the way that shots are set up, filmed, and edited together, it's the direction of characters' gazes that determines where the camera is placed, in which direction the actors are looking when they're filmed, and how the two (or more) resulting shots are edited together. Before our pitcher throws the ball to the batter, he takes a long look at the catcher, who uses some hand signals to communicate with him. He then turns to the first baseman to check on whether the runner there was preparing to steal second. The director films the sequence in four shots, and when he edits them all together, these four shots make sense spatially because of eye-line matching:

- SHOT 1: Full, eye-level shot of PITCHER on mound looking offscreen *left*.
- SHOT 2: Full, eye-level shot of CATCHER crouching and forming hand signals behind batter; the catcher is looking offscreen *right*. The impression created is that the pitcher and the catcher are looking at each other, even though they are not in the same shot.
- SHOT 3: Full, eye-level shot of PITCHER turning on his heels and looking offscreen *right*.
- SHOT 4: Full, eye-level shot of FIRST BASEMAN guarding OPPOSING PLAYER and looking offscreen ... ²

When audiences see this sequence projected as part of an action sequence in a baseball movie, they will understand that the players are looking at one another. Why? Because the rules of eye-line matching have been respected. Imagine the spatial disorientation the audience would experience if the pitcher was filmed looking in the “wrong” direction; the sequence would make little spatial sense and would be much more challenging to follow. Many people in the audience would be bewildered. Confusion may be a legitimate artistic goal, and a truly radical filmmaker may choose to baffle people to make a point. But that filmmaker would find it difficult to succeed with most commercial moviegoers—a legitimate artistic goal in itself, perhaps, but whoever financed the picture would probably not see it that way.

The term **eye-line match** can also be used to describe an edit that occurs between a shot of a person and a following shot of an object though there is also a particular term that describes it, too—**GLANCE-OBJECT MATCH**. Say in the first shot we see a hungry-looking little girl in profile staring toward the left of the image; we would not be jarred or jolted in the slightest to find that the second shot in the sequence contained the image of a large dish of ice cream, and we would assume—given the fact that the director has set up the shots and matched them well—that the little girl is looking at the ice cream. The fact that the little girl was filmed on a Friday afternoon and the ice

cream was filmed separately the following Monday would not matter in the slightest: the glance-object match would bring the little girl and the ice cream together spatially and temporally in a meaningful and coherent way.

The term *eye-line match* may seem odd to describe this two-shot sequence because although the girl's eyes are directed offscreen left, the dish of ice cream can't look back at her. But eye-line matching is not limited to two or more sets of eyes. Even with two characters, only one set of eyes needs to look in a certain direction for an eye-line match to be made.

Of the three types of matches, GRAPHIC MATCHING may be the most difficult to describe. It refers to matching made on the basis of a compositional element—a door or window frame, for example, or any prominent shape. Graphic matches are made by cutting (or dissolving, fading, or wiping) from one shape in the first shot to a similar shape—in the same relative position in the frame—in the second shot. If instead of the easily catchable line drive straight into the second baseman's mitt in the example above, the batter had hit a high but long fly ball that appeared to be heading out of the park, the director could have made a point about the batter's quick demise by matching a shot of the catcher's empty rounded glove with the similarly sized and shaped fielder's glove that receives the batter's ball with a thwack.

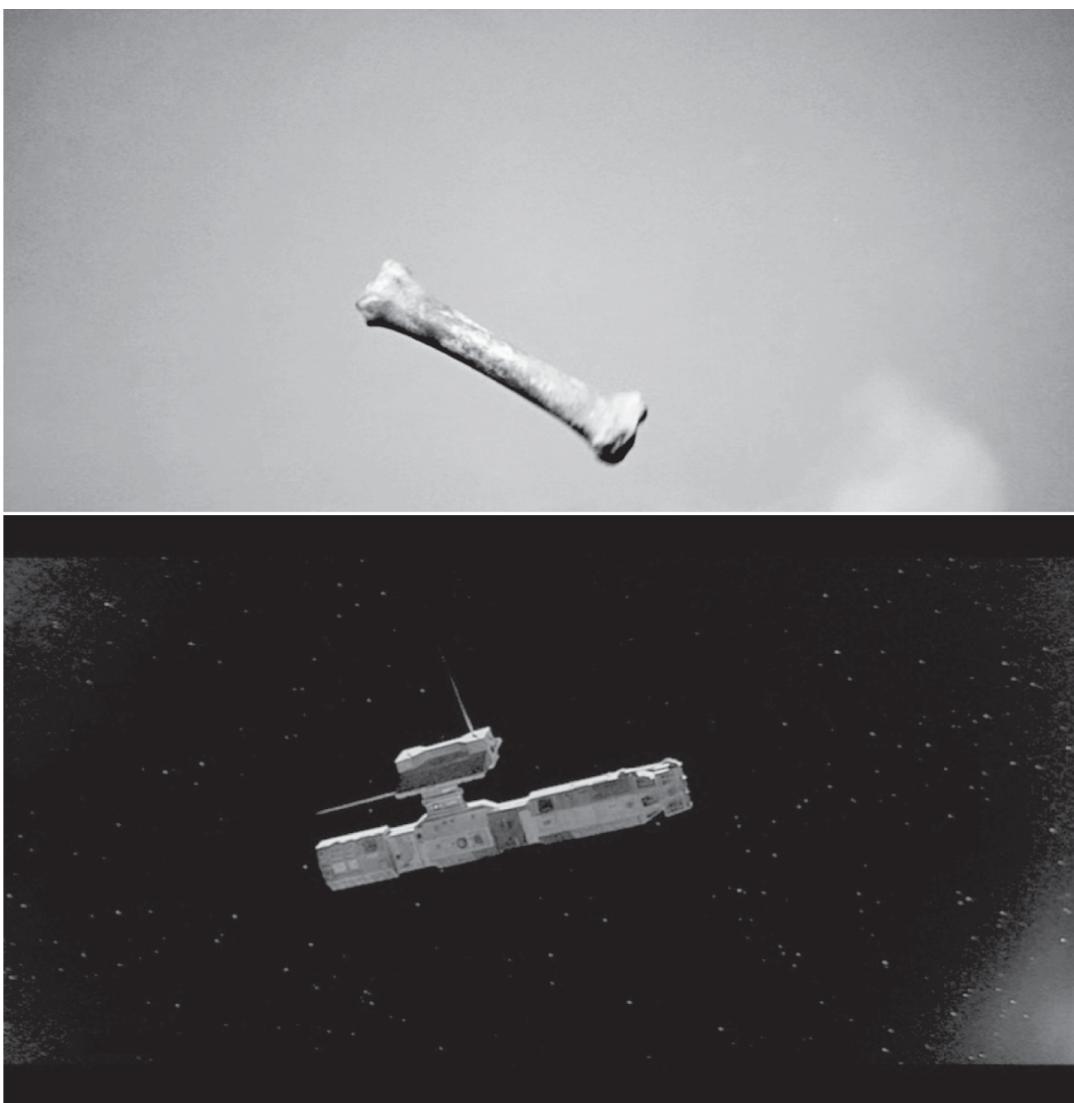


FIGURE 4.4 A graphic match in *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968): from the prehistoric to the futuristic (frame enlargements).

If the batter had been successful, on the other hand, a graphic match could have expressed the point by comparing the shape of the flying ball to a round comet hurtling through the sky leaving a fiery trail in its wake. There is a famous graphic match in Stanley Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968) in which a prehistoric ape tosses a bone in the air in one shot. After it begins to fall to earth in a subsequent shot, Kubrick matches it with a rectangular spaceship, thereby signaling not only the passage of millions of years but also equating a primitive weapon with a futuristic means of space travel.

Usually, graphic matches are not so clearly designed to add additional meaning to the sequence; graphic matches, like eye-line matches and matches on action, are generally employed to smooth over cuts rather than call attention to them.

THE 180° SYSTEM

In addition to these three types of matches, classical Hollywood cinema developed a so-called rule in order to maintain a sense of coherent space within a given film sequence: the 180° rule. Because it is a rule that is often broken, film studies tends more and more to call it THE 180° SYSTEM. Terminology aside, the 180° system provides a simple but crucial way for filmmakers to preserve spatial coherence within a given scene.

Imagine a scene taking place in a living room; there are two chairs set at three-quarter angles to one another, and in these chairs sit two women.

The 180° system suggests that the best way for a director to establish and maintain spatial coherence in this scene (or any scene) is to draw an imaginary line across the axis of the action (the middle of the set), dividing it in two. In [figure 4.5](#), the 180° axis is represented by a dotted line.

If the director keeps the camera on one side of the dotted line for the duration of the sequence—and she would probably choose the side that includes the characters' faces—when the film is edited and projected onto a screen, the woman on the left in the illustration will always be on the right. This seems simple.

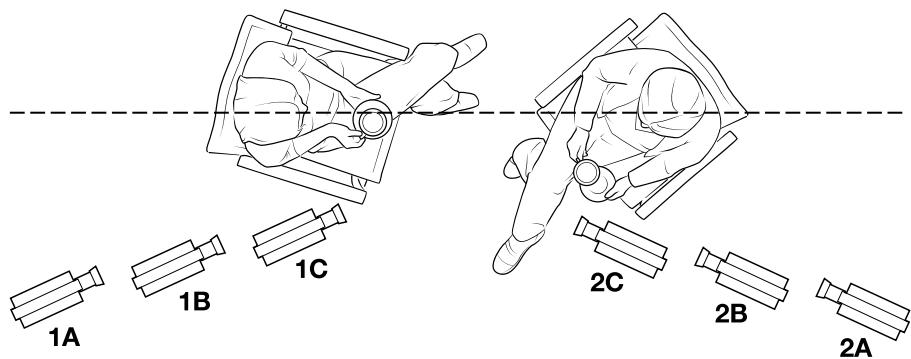


FIGURE 4.5 The 180° system: the cameras generally stay on one side of the dotted line. See figure 4.6 for the corresponding images shot by each camera.

But what happens if she shoots a shot or two from the other side of the imaginary line?³

Please note: the director can *move* the camera across the line while filming without disrupting spatial coherence because the camera movement would make it clear that the space is whole and unified. It is only when *cutting* across the imaginary line that spatial confusion may occur.

SHOT/REVERSE-SHOT PATTERN

One of the most common, efficient, and effective editing patterns developed by classical Hollywood cinema is the SHOT/REVERSE-SHOT PATTERN. To define this technique, let's use the above example of the living room scene illustrated immediately above. The two women are seated in living room chairs set at a three-quarter angle toward each other, and they are having a conversation. Establishing and maintaining the 180° system, the director chooses her first shot to be taken from position 1 (see fig. 4.6). The resulting image onscreen is that of the woman in medium shot facing at a three-quarter angle to the left of the image. Since our director has chosen to film and edit this sequence using a shot/reverse-shot pattern, she then positions the camera to film the so-called “reverse angle,” namely from position 2: now the camera faces the other woman, who is seen onscreen in medium shot, also at three-quarter angle, looking toward the right of the screen.

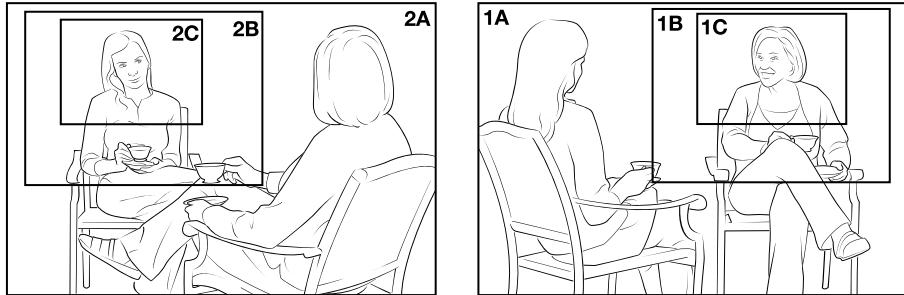


FIGURE 4.6 The shot/reverse-shot pattern: If the first shot of a shot/reverse-shot pattern is 2A, the second shot—the reverse shot—would be 1A. If the director then cuts to a close-up of the woman on the left (1C), the reverse shot would be 2C. Now imagine editing a scene between these two characters, using the framings indicated.

The word “reverse” in this instance does not really mean an absolute reversal of the camera’s place; the camera does not cross over to its truly opposite position because that would mean violating the 180° axis system. Instead, *shot/reverse-shot* means that the shots alternate not between the two characters but between the two *camera positions*, one pointing right, the other pointing left. The shot/reverse-shot pattern can be used to reveal both characters in both shots—the camera pointing over the shoulder of one to the face and upper body of the other—or we can see them as individuals appearing to look at each other by virtue of eye-line matching. Or the shots can be imbalanced: in shot 1 we might see over the shoulder of one character to the face and shoulders of another character, while the so-called reverse shot might only be an angled close-up of the first character. The point is that the director shoots an *apparent* reverse angle while maintaining the 180° axis system, thereby showing both characters from more or less equal but appropriately reverse angles.

1. If the ball flies out of the right side of the image after the batter hits it, it must enter the image again on the left for the rules of continuity editing to be observed.
2. If the pitcher is looking offscreen right, the first baseman must look offscreen *left* if we are to believe that the two men are looking at each other.
3. By cutting across the axis and shooting from the other side of the line, the characters when projected would appear to flip from their regular side of the screen to the opposite side. For most audiences, this would be jarring and disruptive.

STUDY GUIDE: ANALYZING SHOT-TO-SHOT EDITING

To learn to analyze editing, you are going to begin with an exercise of your imagination. You are a beginning filmmaker, and your assignment is to film—in exactly three shots—a character whom you will reveal, mostly by way of editing, to be mentally disturbed.

Other filmmakers might take the easy way out and use mise-en-scene elements like makeup (darkened, hollow-looking eyes, for instance, or a lot of stage blood smeared across the face) or a piece of outrageous physical action or dialogue (the character falling down on the ground and rolling around swearing incoherently, and so on). Still another lazy director could telegraph the character's insanity at the beginning of the sequence by starting off with a close-up of a sign that reads "Pittsburgh Home for the Criminally Insane."

Not you. You will convey this character's insanity by way of editing. You have precisely three shots to do it with, too; not one, not two, not four, but *three*. Yes, the content of each of these three shots will convey information. But your primary task is to consider the shots' contents *in relation to one another*.

Give yourself some time to consider the possibilities.

Once you have thought about the problem for a few minutes, begin to construct the three-shot sequence in your mind at the very least and, if you have even the most rudimentary drawing skills, on paper.

What is your first shot? If you must convey a character's craziness chiefly by way of editing, how do you begin the sequence?

Here are some potential opening shots:

1. An extreme close-up of a single eye staring blankly out from the screen.
2. A very high angle shot of a young man standing in an empty room and looking out the window.
3. A close-up of a young woman's hand nervously twisting a pencil around, seemingly unable to stop.

Bear in mind that the second shot of the sequence will need to relate in some way to the first shot, and that some form of transition must be employed.

Let's concentrate on example 2, above, and decide on a second shot with which to follow it. Here are some potential second shots:

- 2A. An even higher-angle extreme long shot of the young man taken from outside the building. There is no one else in the shot: nobody on the sidewalk outside

- the building, and nobody in any of the other windows.
- 2B.** A close-up of his foot tapping anxiously and continually on the floor.
- 2C.** Linked by an eye-line match, an extreme close-up of a pigeon on the sidewalk far below.

Notice that not much is happening in our sequence. Except for the foot-tapping and pencil-twisting, there is very little physical action. But as the sequence begins to take shape, the relation of shot to shot begins (or should begin, anyway) to convey a certain uneasiness—a sense of anxiety that is enhanced if not entirely created by the relationship of one shot to another. It's true that the character's extreme solitude is expressed by the content of the shots of him looking out the window, but that effect is strongly enhanced by the relationship between the two shots. And the pigeon is disturbing not because it is a pigeon—we might be filming a benign sequence in a city park instead of a three-shot indication of a character's madness—but because it is seen in relation to the first shot of the young man, and the bird's relationship to him is unexplained and therefore troubling.

Let's finish up by following through with 2A, above—the extreme long shot taken from outside the building. What kind of shot would drive home the point of the sequence? It's your decision.

WRITING ABOUT EDITING

As you learned in [chapter 1](#), there are seemingly innumerable mise-en-scene elements within a single shot if you look at it closely and carefully enough. Rapidly cut sequences only compound the extraordinary amount of visual information available for analysis. So to begin to learn how to write about shot-to-shot editing, take a DVD of the film of your choice and choose a simple and fairly short sequence to work on—say five to ten shots in a sequence lasting between 30 seconds and 1 minute. Be sure to choose an individual sequence or part of an individual sequence rather than the end of one sequence and the beginning of another; that's the subject of [chapter 6](#). A **sequence** is simply a series of interrelated shots that form a coherent unit of dramatic action.)

Describe the content of each image thoroughly, but concentrate on the methods by which the director effects [transitions](#) from shot to shot. What type of matching does he or she employ, if any? Does the sequence use a shot/reverse-shot pattern?

Here's an example drawn from the end of Charles Chaplin's *City Lights* (1931). It's longer than ten shots, but it is one of the most famous sequences in world film history; not only is it exceptionally emotionally satisfying, but it contains a fascinating lapse in continuity:

- SHOT 1:** A two-shot of the Tramp and the Girl; the Girl is standing in the doorway of the flower shop on the right side of the screen, and the Tramp is standing on the sidewalk on the left side of the screen. The Girl reaches out with her right hand and offers the Tramp a flower she is holding. The Tramp turns and reaches out to take the flower with his left hand. The flower is in the center of the screen as he takes it. As the Tramp pulls his left hand back with the flower, the Girl steps toward him as he puts the flower in his right hand and quickly pulls him by the left hand toward her. Chaplin cuts on this action to:
- SHOT 2:** A closer two-shot taken from the reverse angle. This shot is taken over the Tramp's right shoulder. The Girl is seen at a three-quarter angle; both characters are in medium shot. The Girl, now holding the Tramp's left hand in hers, looks the Tramp in the eye and smiles, but as she begins to pat the Tramp's left hand with her right hand (the Tramp is still holding the flower in his other hand), her expression changes to one of newfound understanding: she recognizes the touch of her previously unseen benefactor's hand and realizes that this ridiculous homeless man has enabled her vision to be restored. She now appears to be looking not only at him but into him; her gaze is penetrating. Chaplin cuts on the action of the Girl patting the Tramp's hand to:
- SHOT 3:** A reverse-angle shot, taken at a closer distance (but not a close-up) of the two people's hands clasped in the center of the image. The Tramp's right hand is raised to his face. The camera tilts up and pans slightly left to reveal a closer medium shot of the Tramp, who is holding the flower in front of the right side of his face, his hand covering his mouth. The side of the Girl's head is visible on the right side of the image; her left hand is now touching the lapel of the Tramp's worn jacket. She begins to withdraw her left hand as Chaplin cuts on the action to:
- SHOT 4:** A reverse angle two-shot (the same as Shot 2). She now pulls her right hand back and touches her own face in a gesture that indicates comprehension; the weight of her recognition grows. Oddly, the flower the Tramp holds is no longer at the level of his face but is now in front of his chest. The Girl mouths the words, "It's you?" before Chaplin cuts to:
- SHOT 5:** A [TITLE CARD](#) that reads, "You?" Cut to:
- SHOT 6:** More or less the same shot as Shot 3, only a bit closer; now only the barest sliver of the Girl's head is visible at the very edge of the right-hand side of the image. The Tramp nods in response to the Girl's question. The flower is back up at the Tramp's face, and his index finger appears to be touching his lips. Chaplin cuts on his slight nodding action to:
- SHOT 7:** The same as Shot 4. The flower is again at chest level. Chaplin cuts rather quickly to:

- SHOT 8:** The same as Shot 6; the flower is again at the Tramp's face. He points to his own right eye and mouths the words, "You can see now?" Cut to:
- SHOT 9:** A title card that reads, "You can see now?" Cut to:
- SHOT 10:** The same as Shot 8. The Tramp smiles. Cut to:
- SHOT 11:** The same as Shot 7. The flower is once again at chest level as the Girl nods and mouths the word, "Yes." She swallows, indicating the depth of her emotion, and mouths the words, "I can see now." Cut to:
- SHOT 12:** A title card that reads, "Yes, I can see now." Cut to:
- SHOT 13:** The same as Shot 11. The Girl appears to mouth the word "yes" twice as she gazes at the Tramp. Chaplin cuts to:
- SHOT 14:** More or less the same as Shot 10: Not quite close enough to be a close-up of the Tramp, because not only is his face visible but also his shoulders, but close enough to register the depth of emotion in his face as he begins to giggle with pleasure at the Girl's recognition of him. The flower is once again at the level of his face, and his hand partially covers his mouth. Fade out.

What do you notice about the sequence? Film scholars have puzzled over the ending of *City Lights* since the film's release in 1931; the sequence is one of the most emotionally satisfying endings ever filmed, and yet the director, Chaplin, violates one of the cardinal rules of continuity editing by not matching the position of the flower from shot to shot. Is this simply an error—an editing glitch? Or is there an expressive purpose behind it? Could it be a glitch *and still have expressive meaning?* These questions could form the basis of a great final paper for your course.