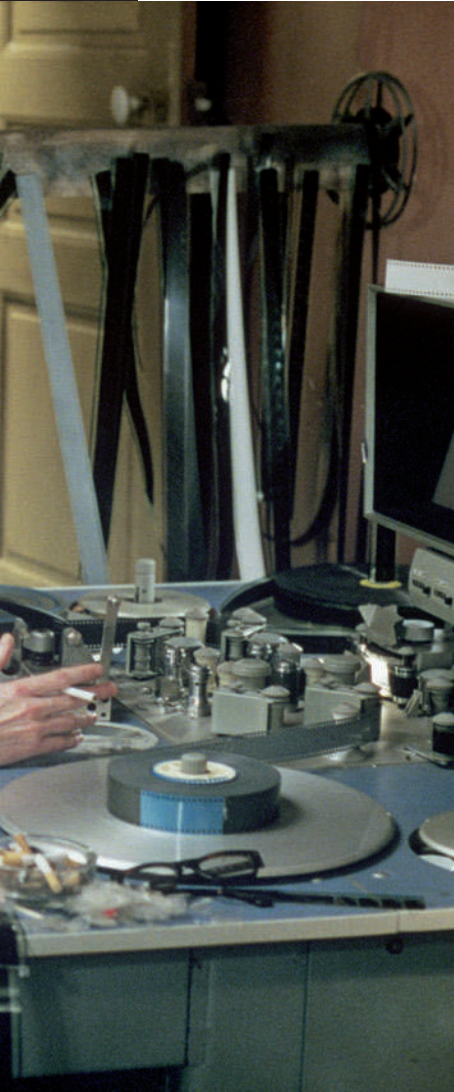




CONSTRUCTING MEANING

CQ
(dir: Roman Coppola 2001)



As ever, film is a construction of hundreds of individual shots. The skill of the editor is to construct a coherent whole out of this material.

One of the most significant debates throughout the history of film has been the battle between the formalists and the realists. The formalists thought film was an abstract art form based on artistic principles of composition and manipulation. The realists argued that film was a reflection of our material reality, like photography, although with the capacity for recording movement. At the heart of this battle was editing.

There were those, such as André Bazin, who felt editing added little, and reminded the audience that they were watching a film; he preferred the long take. Others, such as Sergei Eisenstein, saw cinema as montage, as a construction that was intellectual and dialectical. Throughout the 1920s he battled with his Russian contemporaries, such as Vsevolod Pudovkin, who saw editing as a series, a progression of continuous shots.

Meanwhile, on the other side of the world, D. W. Griffith had developed what we now know as continuity editing, a logical, coherent and psychologically dramatic mode of editing that remains the dominant mode of editing today in both film and television.

Glossary

Jump cuts: The term jump cut can be used in two ways. First, it can refer to a shot that is arrhythmic or disjunctive and produces a noticeable skip between two shots, either because action isn't matched or the shots break the 30° rule. Most commonly, though, jump cuts refer to cuts that interrupt a single shot, literally producing a jump.

Master (or establishing)

shot: Often the first shot of a scene, the master, usually a long shot, shows the viewer the whole scene, the setting, spatial relationships between characters and important action. Sometimes, whole scenes are shot 'in masters'.

Continuity is the dominant style of editing used by film-makers. It has developed over more than a century as a way in which space, time and narrative can be constructed out of hundreds of fragments to form a coherent, logical and continuous whole. It allows two shots that might have been filmed months apart, in different locations, to be cut together following a pattern of established rules to suggest they happened one after another.

The rules

Continuity has often been criticised as a conservative method of film-making. It slavishly follows rules and presents the viewer with an image of the world that is ordered, coherent and structured.

Of course, the real world doesn't function this way but film audiences have been conditioned to accept these editing rules as dominant, hegemonic even, so that any deviation from this pattern looks 'wrong' and shatters the illusion. Of course, some film-makers want to achieve this effect, but we'll leave that until the next section.

Continuity editing follows a series of rules that fulfil several purposes:

- To tell a story. Everything must be used to tell the story. It is economical, and anything unnecessary must be cut out, while repetition must be minimised.
- To construct and preserve a coherence of space.
- To maintain a continuity of time.
- To create and sustain graphic and rhythmic relations.
- To hide the means of construction from the viewer.

The cliché goes that, like film music, editing is successful when the viewer doesn't notice it. Pacing is maintained, there are no **jump cuts** and the sense of space and time is preserved. If the viewer notices a cut, then the editor has failed. This, largely, is nonsense.

Continuity editing is a style, albeit a realist one, but the editor does not need to slavishly follow rules. Art can be subversive and it is often in breaking the rules that the artist makes his or her trade. If you see a film in which the editing is visible, don't immediately think that it's just a mistake, but try to think why the film-maker has included that cut and what it means.

Continuity editing has a number of ‘rules’ that need to be observed to preserve either temporal or spatial continuity, these are:

- The 180° rule
- Match-on-action
- Eyeline matches
- The 30° rule
- Shot-reverse-shot editing

A typical scene edited in this style will follow a similar pattern. The scene will begin with a **master shot**; this will often be a long shot that establishes the basic spatial pattern for the scene. From here, the editor will cut closer into the action. If it is a dialogue-driven scene, there may be a combination of two-shot medium close-ups from the waist up or close-ups for important lines of dialogue and reactions. An action scene will tend to use more close-ups. Modern action scenes will often use montage principles of metric or rhythmic pacing for impact.

The 180° rule

The 180° rule is intended to preserve spatial continuity in a sequence. When the sequence is shot, the director will observe an imaginary 180° line across which he or she will not cross.

For example, if in one shot, a character is walking left to right and exits frame right, the character must enter the next shot from frame left and continue to walk left to right. If the director places the camera on the other side of the action, the action will be inverted; even if the location is the same and the character is walking in the same direction, when cut together the actor will appear to be walking in the opposite direction, thereby breaking spatial continuity and confusing the audience.

Match-on-action

Like the 180° rule, the match-on-action is used to preserve spatial continuity. However, it is also used to show the temporal progression of the action. If the character in the previous example encountered a door, the action would need to be matched across shots. The first shot would show the actor opening the door and beginning to walk through. The next would show the actor coming through the door without repeating the door opening or skipping part of the action.

If the action is not matched, the cut would be visible, producing a noticeable jump. This is fine if you want to call attention to the cut for an artistic purpose, but not if you want to show a smooth, flowing action.

Tip

A violation of the 180° rule is known as ‘crossing the line’. This can sometimes be avoided by inserting a buffer shot from a head-on angle to make the transition to the other side.

Things to look out for

Watch the car chase at the factory in *Goldfinger* (dir: Guy Hamilton 1964); look out for a moment where Bond’s car crosses the line. Why do you think the director has included this? It’s not just because the footage didn’t edit together, so what is its effect?

Recommended reading

Ken Dancyger's *The Technique of Film and Video Editing* (2006) is a comprehensive exploration of the role of the editor and the style, history and technique of editing.

Eyeline matches

Eyeline matches are another important device used to preserve spatial coherence.

Imagine our actor again: they've entered a new room and we see them look off frame right, slightly down. In the next shot, we see another actor; they're looking at our first actor. This second actor needs to be looking slightly upwards toward the eyeline of the first actor. This is an important point of continuity. The lines must match to show that the two actors aren't just staring off into space. Of course, they probably haven't been looking at each other on the set, but the matched cut constructs that relationship.

The same would be true of a point of view (POV) shot from our actor's perspective. If he is looking downwards out of frame, the subjective shot that follows would need to tilt down to match that eyeline.

If you want to see an example of how this important continuity rule isn't followed, just watch Ed Wood's *Plan 9 from Outer Space* (1959), notoriously regarded as the worst film of all time. Wood and his editor don't follow any of the conventional rules of continuity.

The 30° rule

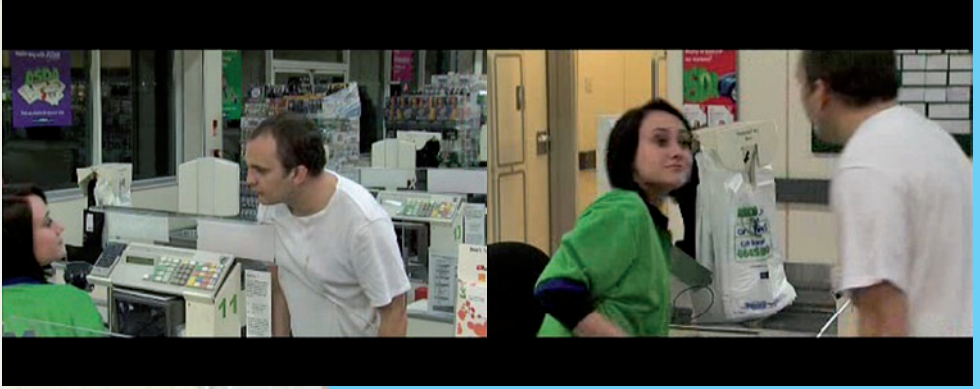
The 30° rule is a simple, but important, rule that editors and directors must remember. If shot angles differ by less than 30°, the cut will produce a noticeable jump as the angles are too similar to be cut together.

Again, this doesn't stop directors breaking the rule. For example, François Truffaut breaks this rule in *Shoot the Pianist* (1960) when he uses a triple cut (cutting closer and closer within the same shot like a zoom) of a character hovering over a door bell, but choosing not to ring it. The jumpy cut says a lot about the fragmented, hesitant state of mind of our protagonist (an example of expressionism).

The secret to film is that it's an illusion.

George Lucas, producer, screenwriter and director

Cheap Beans
(dir: Martyn Johnston 2008)



This cut is matched on action: the girl turns her head and moves upwards into shot. The cut matches on that action, as she continues to turn into the second shot.

Glossary

Cutaways: Shot-reverse-shot might also include shots of a character reacting to a line of dialogue; shots like these are known as cutaways, or, in TV, 'noddies'.

Shot-reverse-shot editing

Shot-reverse-shot editing is the 'meat and potatoes' of continuity editing. It's where all the rules come together.

Following the 180° rule and principles of continuity, shot-reverse-shot editing refers to the back-and-forth method often used for conversations and reaction shot **cutaways**. To return to our two actors who have now met: they strike up a conversation. The cutting of close-ups would be as follows:

- Shot one: Actor one, framed to left of frame in medium close-up (MCU) looking toward frame right.
- Shot two: Actor two, framed to right of frame in MCU looking toward frame left.
- Shot three: as shot one.
- Shot four: as shot two (and so on).

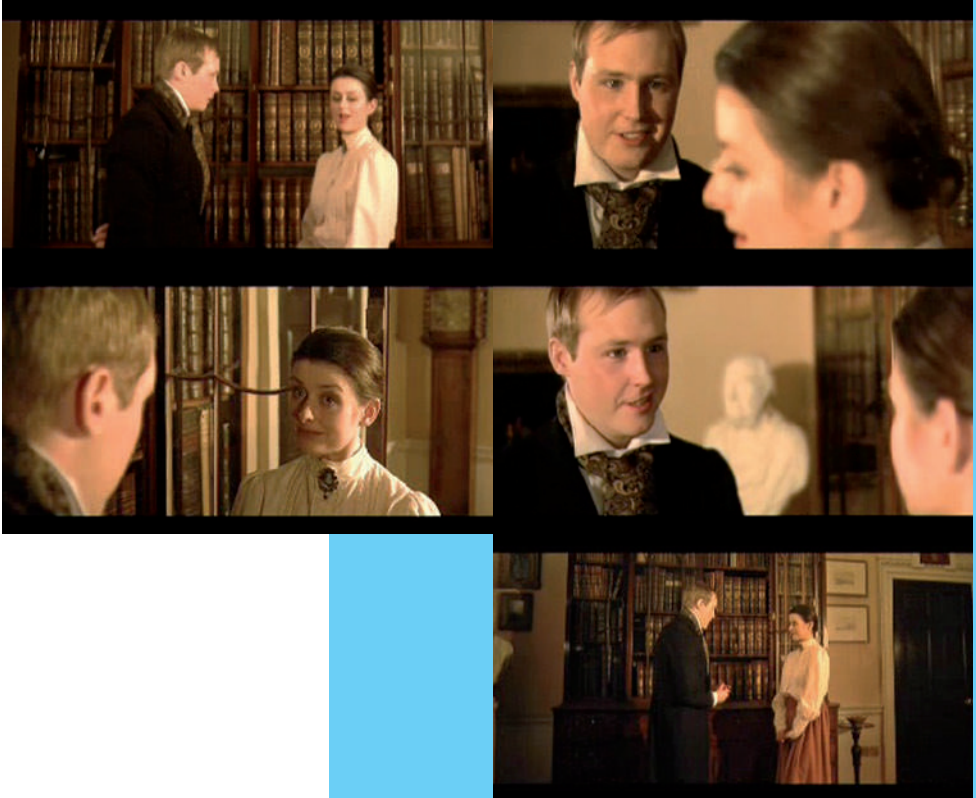
This pattern will preserve the coherence of space. If we were to flip shot two, it would appear the same as shot one and would have crossed the line. This would make the actors appear to be either in the same place or talking away from each other. Either way, space would be shattered and the images would look too similar, producing a jump cut by violating the 30° rule.

Missing reverse shot

Shot-reverse-shot can also be used to hide things and trouble the viewer. For example, *Halloween* (dir: John Carpenter 1978) begins with a long hand-held sequence in which the viewer witnesses a brutal murder from someone's perspective (the action is shown through mask holes – it's an obvious POV shot). The viewer isn't offered a reverse shot for a long time. It is troubling not to know who is committing this horrific crime. As such, the viewer is implicated in the murder as a voyeur.

Carpenter only inserts (or 'sutures') a subject into the subjective shot with the final reverse shot – when the viewer is shown the six-year old Michael Myers. Carpenter could have included a reverse shot much earlier to provide us with this information, but he decides not to. The viewer naturally wants to know who the murderer is, but this information is withheld until the end of the sequence. It is typical of the horror film to withhold narrative information from the viewer by avoiding reverse shots for POVs. Part of the pleasure of the horror film is identifying with monsters and villains; the missing reverse shot can help make this possible.

Without Wires (dir: Alex Woodcock 2008)



In this brief sequence, we see a good example of shot-reverse-shot organisation. After the initial establishing shot, we follow shot-reverse-shot, back and forth between the actors' dialogue before returning to another two-shot. Notice how the camera does not cross the line, the action preserves a continuous line of action and eyelines match between shots.

Intensified continuity

David Bordwell has noted that the standard continuity style has intensified since the 1960s, becoming dominant in the 1980s. The intensified style of continuity is still rooted in the traditional premises of spatial continuity. However, Bordwell finds that this modern style of continuity tends to use fewer master shots than previous examples, which re-establish space when characters move. The style is also marked by:

- more editing
- more and tighter close-ups
- more shots overall, especially of reactions
- use of longer lenses, producing tight long shots
- fewer medium shots

Rather than turning toward a greater montage style, Bordwell sees these changes as an intensification of the existing style rather than a change in pattern. The new rule is more, tighter and faster.

EXERCISE

Reading the edit

Choose a five-minute sequence in a narrative film. Explore the editing of the sequence. Try to look for the ways in which the editor follows the rules of continuity editing, especially graphic and eyeline matches. Are there any moments where those rules aren't followed? If there are, what is the consequence of those moments?

Transitions

There are a number of common devices that an editor can use to imply ellipses (cuts in which material is implied as missing). Similarly, these devices can be used to suggest jumps in time and space:

- **Dissolves:** a smooth transition from one shot to another.
- **Fades:** a transition from one shot to another with a fade to black (or other colour), and fade into the second shot.
- **Wipes:** a line wipes one shot from the screen, which is replaced by the next.
- **Irisés:** a circular frame closes on one shot and opens on another, often isolating an important detail; irisés were commonly used in silent cinema for emphasis.
- **Freeze frames:** the frame may freeze before a transition or can stop time for emphasis. Often an arty technique.

Unlike straight cuts, most of the above are 'soft' transitions and are less jarring for the viewer.

Similarly, graphic matches are edits that create visual relationships between shots. They often emphasise thematic or spatial relationships between objects/subjects. For instance, in *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968), Stanley Kubrick uses a single cut to show the viewer the history of human evolution. The 'Dawn of Man' prologue ends with a shot of an ape throwing a bone in the air. The bone spins and begins to fall, at which point Kubrick cuts to a shot of a spaceship drifting through space. The movement and shape of the two objects is matched graphically, stressing a thematic relationship between the first tool and the invention of space travel. It is all done in a single cut.

Recommended viewing

Watch *Star Wars* (dir: George Lucas 1977) and see how many different kinds of transitions are used to move from one scene to another smoothly. This is a motif used throughout the series and its spin-offs.

Film editing is now something almost everyone can do at a simple level and enjoy it, but to take it to a higher level requires the same dedication and persistence that any art form does.

Walter Murch, film editor and sound designer