

asynchronous and commentative element of the soundtrack—has now become so pervasive in real life that a filmmaker can maintain strict synchronicity of actual sound and still produce a complete music track. The ubiquitous Walkman radio and Boom Box have made life a musical.

Montage

In the U.S., the word for the work of putting together the shots of a film is "cutting" or "editing," while in Europe the term is "montage." The American words suggest a trimming process, in which unwanted material is eliminated. Michelangelo once described sculpture similarly as paring away unneeded stone to discover the natural shape of the sculpture in a block of marble. One edits or cuts raw material down. "Montage," however, suggests a building action, working up from the raw material. Indeed, the classic style of Hollywood editing of the thirties and forties, revived in part in the eighties—what the French call *découpage classique*—was in fact marked by its smoothness, fluidity, and leanness. And European montage, ever since the German Expressionists and Eisenstein in the twenties, has been characterized by a process of synthesis: a film is seen as being constructed rather than edited. The two terms for the action express the two basic attitudes toward it.

Whereas *mise-en-scène* is marked by a fusion of complexities, montage is surprisingly simple, at least on the physical level. There are only two ways to put two pieces of film together: one can overlap them (double exposure, dissolves, multiple images), or one can put them end to end. For images, the second alternative dominates almost exclusively, while sounds lend themselves much more readily to the first, so much so that this activity has its own name: *mixing*.

In general parlance, "montage" is used in three different ways. While maintaining its basic meaning, it also has the more specific usages of:

- a dialectical process that creates a third meaning out of the original two meanings of the adjacent shots; and
- a process in which a number of short shots are woven together to communicate a great deal of information in a short time.

This last is simply a special case of general montage; the dialectical process is inherent in any montage, conscious or not.



Figure 3-71. To end *The Passenger* with a long, majestic, and mysterious track up to and through a window, Antonioni set up this complex apparatus—sort of a combination of a Steadicam, Skycam, and overhead track. The operator guided the camera, suspended from a crane, up to the window grill, which grips then opened while attaching the camera to the crane so that it could move out into the courtyard.

Découpage classique, the Hollywood style of construction, gradually developed a broad range of rules and regulations: for example, the practice of beginning always with an establishing shot, then narrowing down from the generalization; or the strict rule of thumb for editing dialogue scenes with master shots and reverse angles. All the editing practices of the Hollywood grammar were designed to permit seamless transitions from shot to shot and to concentrate attention on the action at hand. What helped to maintain immediacy and the flow of the action was good; what did not was bad.

In fact, any kind of montage is in the end defined according to the action it photographs. Still pictures can be put together solely with regard to the rhythm of the succeeding shots. Diachronic shots, inherently active, demand that the movements within the shot be considered in the editing. The jump cut, where the natural movement is interrupted, provides an interesting example of the contrasting ways in which découpage classique and contemporary editing treat a problem.

In Hollywood cinema, “invisible cutting” was the aim, and the jump cut was used as a device to compress dead time. A man enters a large room at one end, for instance, and must walk to a desk at the other end. The jump cut can maintain tempo by eliminating most of the action of traversing the long room, but it must do so unobtrusively. The laws of Hollywood grammar insist that the excess dead time be smoothed over

either by cutting away to another element of the scene (the desk itself, someone else in the room) or by changing camera angle sufficiently so that the second shot is clearly from a different camera placement. Simply snipping out the unwanted footage from a single shot from a single angle is not permitted. The effect, according to Hollywood rules, would be disconcerting.

Modern style, however, permits far greater latitude. In *Breathless* (1959), Jean-Luc Godard startled some estheticians by jump cutting in mid-shot. The cuts had no utilitarian value and they were disconcerting. Godard himself seldom returned to this device in later films, but his "ungrammatical" construction was absorbed into general montage stylistics, and jump cuts are now allowed for rhythmic effect. Even the simple utilitarian jump cut has been streamlined: edited from a single shot (single angle), it can be smoothed by a series of quick dissolves.

The lively 1960s films of Richard Lester—especially his musicals *A Hard Day's Night* (1964), *Help!* (1965), and *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum* (1966)—popularized jump cuts, rapid and "ungrammatical" cutting. Over time, his brash editorial style became a norm, now celebrated every night around the world in hundreds of music videos on MTV. Because these video images now dominate our lives it's hard to understand how fresh and inventive these techniques seemed in the 1960s. Because this style is now so pervasive in music videos, Lester must be counted as—at least in one sense—the most influential film stylist since D. W. Griffith. Except for morphs, there are few techniques of contemporary music videos that Richard Lester didn't first try in the 1960s. (But then, there isn't much about contemporary music that the Beatles and their colleagues didn't first explore in the 1960s.)

It's important to note that there are actually two processes going on when shots are edited. The first is the joining of the two shots. Also important, however, is determining the length of any individual shot, both as it relates to shots that precede and follow it and as it concerns the action of the shot. *Découpage classique* demands that a shot be cut so that the editing doesn't interfere with the central action of the shot. If we plot the action of each shot so that we get a rising then a falling curve, Hollywood grammar demands a cut shortly after the climax of the curve. Modern directors like Michelangelo Antonioni, however, reversed the



Figure 3-72. Robert Altman's magnificent satire of the film industry, *The Player* (1992), begins with a reel-long tracking shot which is the equal of Murnau's, Welles's, or Godard's: establishing the location, setting up the action, introducing the characters, passing by small incidental dramas, tossing off inside jokes, peering in windows, and, postmodernly talking about its antecedents at the same time that it pays homage to them, even while Altman's own shot surpasses those of his predecessors, distanced with insouciant wit, as if to say, "long tracking shots, like long sentences, separate the players from the rest." (*Frame enlargement.*)

logic, maintaining the shot long after the climax, throughout the period of aftermath. The last shot of *The Passenger* (1975) is an excellent example.

The rhythmic value of editing is probably best seen in the code of "accelerated montage," in which interest in a scene is heightened and brought to a climax through progressively shorter alternations of shots between two subjects (often in chase scenes). Christian Metz pointed to accelerated montage as a uniquely cinematic code (although Charles Ives's antagonistic brass bands provided an illustration of this kind of cross-cutting in music). Accelerated montage points in the direction of a second type of editing.

Montage is used not only to create a continuity between shots in a scene but also to bend the time line of a film. "Parallel" montage allows the filmmaker to alternate between two stories that may or may not be interrelated, cross-cutting between them. (Accelerated montage is a special type of parallel montage.) The flashback and the flash-forward permit digressions and forecasts. "Involute" montage allows a sequence to be narrated without particular regard for chronology: an action can be

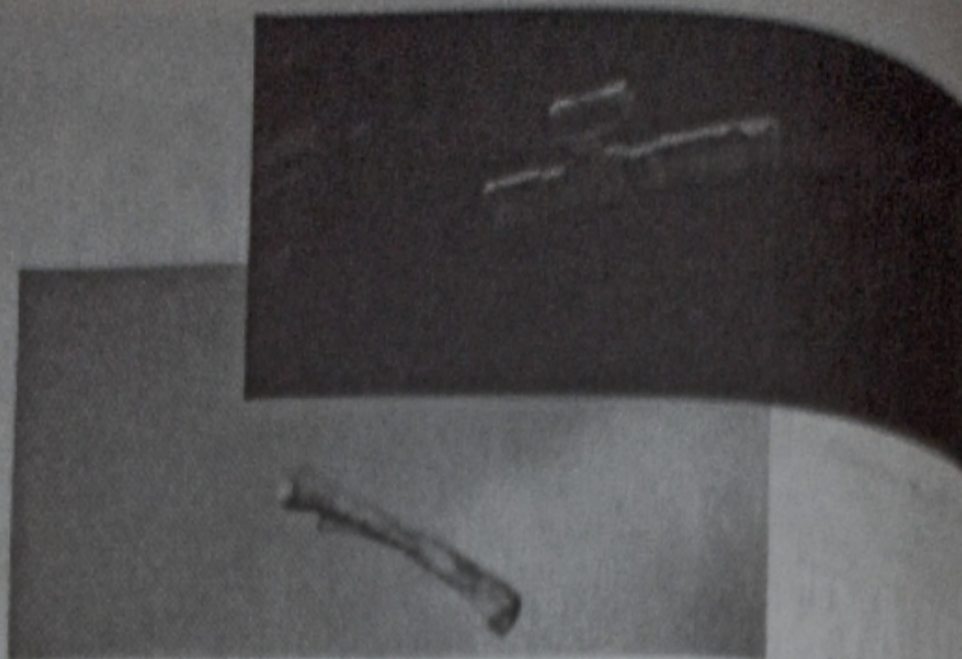


Figure 3-73. Kubrick's transcendent match cut. (*Frame enlargements.*)

repeated, shots can be edited out of order. Each of these extensions of the montage codes looks toward the creation of something other than simple chronology in the montage itself, a factor very little emphasized in classic *découpage* continuity cutting.

Possibly the most common dialectic device is the match cut, which links two disparate scenes by the repetition of an action or a form, or the duplication of *mise-en-scène*. Stanley Kubrick's match cut in *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968), between a prehistoric bone whirling in the air and a twenty-first-century space station revolving in space, is possibly the most ambitious match cut in history, since it attempts to unite prehistory with the anthropological future at the same time as it creates a special meaning within the cut itself by emphasizing the functions of both bone and space station as tools, extensions of human capabilities.

The codes of montage may not be as obvious as the codes of *mise-en-scène*, but that doesn't mean that they are necessarily less complex. Few theorists have gone further than differentiating among parallel montage, continuity montage, accelerated montage, flashbacks, and involuted montage. In the 1920s, both V. I. Pudovkin and Sergei Eisenstein extended the theory of montage beyond these essentially practical concerns. Pudovkin identified five basic types of montage: contrast, parallelism, symbolism, simultaneity, and leitmotif. He then developed a theory of the interaction between shots variously called "relational editing"

or "linkage." Eisenstein, on the other hand, saw the relationship between shots as a collision rather than a linkage, and further refined the theory well as the whole shots themselves. This he called the "montage of attractions." Both theorists are discussed in greater detail in Chapter 5.

In the late sixties, Christian Metz attempted to synthesize all these various theories of montage. He constructed a chart in which he tried to indicate how eight types of montage were connected logically. There are a number of problems with Metz's categories, yet the system does have an elegance all its own and it does describe most of the major patterns of montage. More important, despite its idiosyncrasies and occasional confusions, it remains the only recent attempt to comprehend the complex system of montage.

Note that Metz is interested in narrative elements—syntagmas—that can exist within shots as well as between them, an important refinement since, as we have already indicated, the effects of many types of montage can be accomplished within a shot without actually cutting. If the camera pans, for example, from one scene to another, those two scenes exist in relationship to each other just as they would if they were cut together.

Metz's grand design may seem forbidding at first glance, but it reveals a real and useful logic when studied. He begins by limiting himself to autonomous segments of film. These must be either autonomous shots—which are entirely independent of what comes before and after them—or what he calls "syntagmas"—units that have meaningful relationships with each other. (We might call these "scenes" or "sequences," but Metz reserves those terms for individual types of syntagma.) At each stage of this binary system, a further differentiation is made: the first bracket differentiates between autonomous shots and related shots, clearly the primary factor in categorizing types of montage. Either a shot is related to its surrounding shots, or it is not.

The second bracket differentiates between syntagmas that operate chronologically and those that do not. In other words, editing either tells a story (or develops an idea) in chronological sequence, or it does not. Now, on the third level, the differentiations branch out. Metz identifies two separate types of achronological syntagmas, the parallel and the bracket. Then he differentiates between two types of chronological syntagmas: either

a syntagma describes or it narrates. If it narrates, it can do so either linearly or nonlinearly. If it does so linearly, it is either a scene or a sequence. And finally, if it is a sequence, it is either episodic or ordinary.

The end result is a system of eight types of montage, or eight syntagmas. The autonomous shot (1) is also known as the sequence shot (although Metz also places certain kinds of inserts—short, isolated fragments—here). The parallel syntagma (2) has been discussed above as the well-known phenomenon of parallel editing. The bracket syntagma (3), however, is Metz's own discovery—or invention. He defines it as "a series of very brief scenes representing occurrences that the film gives as typical examples of a same order or reality, without in any way chronologically locating them in relation to each other" [Metz, p. 126].

This is rather like a system of allusions. A good example might be the collection of images with which Godard began *A Married Woman* (1964). They all alluded to modern attitudes toward sex. Indeed, Godard in many of his films seemed to be particularly fond of the bracket syntagma, since it allows film to act something like the literary essay.

The descriptive syntagma (4) merely describes. The relation between its elements is spatial rather than temporal. Almost any establishing sequence (such as the one already discussed in *Rear Window*) is a good example of the descriptive syntagma. The alternate syntagma (5) is very much like the parallel syntagma except that the parallel syntagma offers two separate scenes or sequences that do not have a narrative connection, while the alternate syntagma offers parallel or alternating elements that do. The effect here is of simultaneity, as in chase scenes in which the montage alternates between shots of pursuer and pursued.

If events do not happen simultaneously, they happen one after the other, in linear sequence, and this brings us to Metz's remaining three categories of montage: the scene (6) and two types of sequence—episodic (7) and ordinary (8). There has always been a great deal of confusion in the vocabulary of film criticism between the concepts of scene and sequence, and Metz's elaborate system is valuable for the precise definitions he offers. Metz takes his definition of scene from theatrical parlance. In the scene, the succession of events—the linear narrative—is continuous. In the sequence, it is broken up. It is still linear, it is still narrative, it is still chronological, it is still related to other elements, but it

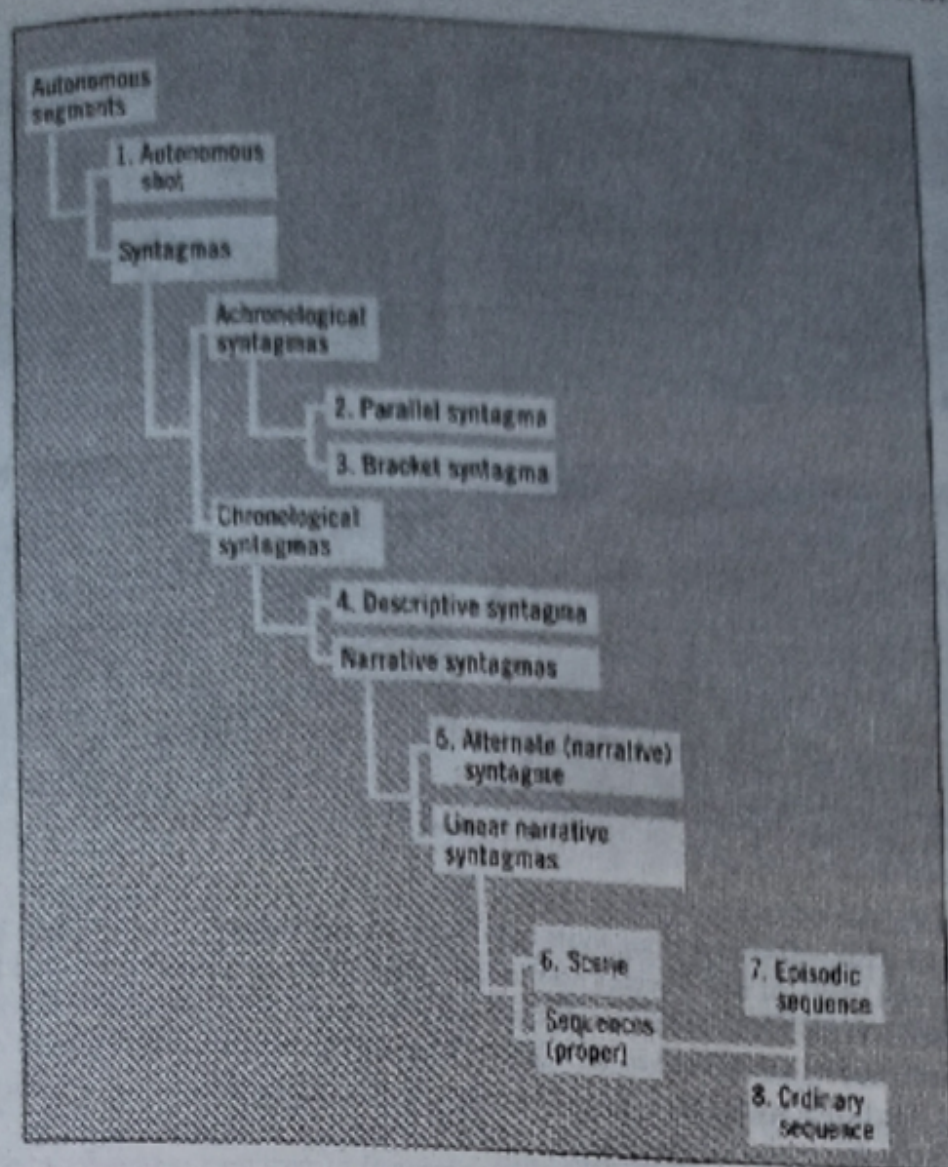


Diagram 1. METZ'S SYNTAGMATIC CATEGORIES

is not continuous.

Metz's last differentiation, between the episodic sequence and the ordinary sequence, is a bit arbitrary. In the episodic sequence the discontinuity is organized; in the ordinary sequence it is not. A good example, then, of the episodic sequence is the one in *Citizen Kane* in which Orson Welles portrays the progressive deterioration of Kane's marriage by a set of successive episodes at the breakfast table. In fact, we might call this a "sequence of scenes," and this is a major characteristic of the episodic sequence—that its elements are organized so that each of them seems to have an identity of its own.

Some of these differentiations might still not be clear. For most film viewers, the concepts of the bracket syntagma and the descriptive



Figure 3-74. This sequence of four shots is a double dissolve from Alfred Hitchcock's *North by Northwest* (1959). At first it seems no more than a highly economical transition from the previous scene at the UN building, in which Roger Thornhill (Cary Grant) has been mistaken for a murderer, to a conference at the CIA in Washington, at which this turn of events is discussed. Hitchcock segues from his striking overhead shot of the antlike Thornhill running away from the slab of the UN Secretariat (barely visible in A) to the building nameplate in B. Since Hitchcock has had the foresight to use a mirrored surface for the sign, it can reflect the Capitol building, thus identifying the city as well as "company" and neatly saving an extra shot. He then dissolves to the newspaper headline in D, which tells us that (1) time has passed, (2) Thornhill has been identified, and (3) he has so far eluded capture. The newspaper is being held by the head of the intelligence agency. Hitchcock pulls back from the paper and goes on with the conference scene.

At the same time, however, there is some rich metaphorical information in this elegant little dissolve, for, if we analyze these still images, we can see that the CIA imposes itself on the UN, that the Capitol is a reflection of the CIA (or that the intelligence agency has superimposed itself over the seat of government), and finally, that the CIA gives birth to the newspaper headlines that include, in addition to the one conveying the necessary information: "National Fears Tieup" and "Nixon Promises West Will Remain in Berlin." (*Frame enlargements.*)

syntagma are so close that differentiation may seem specious. Parallel syntagma and alternate syntagma present the same difficulty, as do episodic and ordinary sequences. Yet, despite its problems, Metz's system remains a helpful guide to what is, as yet, relatively uncharted territory: the ever-shifting, complex, and intricate syntax of film narrative. Whether

or not his eight categories seem valid, the factors of differentiation that he defines are highly significant and bear repeating:

- Either a film segment is autonomous or it is not.
- Either it is chronological or it is not.
- Either it is descriptive or it is narrative.
- Either it is linear or it is not.
- Either it is continuous or it is not.
- Either it is organized or it is not.

We have only to describe the punctuation of cinema to complete this quick survey of the syntax of *mise-en-scène* and montage. Because punctuation devices stand out and are simply defined, they often take pride of place in discussions of cinematic language. They are useful, no doubt, as are, well, commas, for example, in written language.

The simplest type of punctuation is the unmarked cut. One image ends, another begins. The "fade" calls attention to the ending or the beginning, as does the "iris" (a favorite of early filmmakers that has now fallen into disuse). The "wipe," in which one image removes another in a dizzying variety of ways (flips, twirls, pushovers, spirals, clock hands), was a favorite in the thirties and forties. Optical houses offered catalogues of scores of patterns for wipes. Now it is used in film only for nostalgic effect, although it has found new life in television, where electronic special-effects generators permit new variations on the theme, sometimes shifting the preceding image so it looks like a page of a book is being turned, in three dimensions.

"Intertitles" were an important mark of punctuation in the silent cinema and are still used on occasion today. The "freeze frame" has become popular since it was used to such effect by Francois Truffaut in *The 400 Blows* (1959). (Truffaut, by the way, was the C. S. Lewis of film punctuation.) Filmmakers in the 1960s and 1970s modernized some of the old forms, fading to colors instead of black (Ingmar Bergman) or cutting to blank, colored frames (Godard). Focusing in and out (the effect of going slowly in focus at the beginning of the shot, or out of focus at the end) paralleled fading, and Antonioni was fond of beginning a shot on an out-of-focus background before an in-focus subject moved into the frame.



Figure 3-75. Truffaut's landmark freeze frame brings *The 400 Blows* to an abrupt and quizzical stop. (MOMA/FSA.)

All these various marks are periods. End points. A fade out/fade in may suggest a relationship, but it is not a direct link. The dissolve, however, which superimposes fade out and fade in, does connect. If there is a comma in film amongst this catalogue of periods, it is the dissolve. Interestingly, the dissolve serves a multitude of purposes: it is commonly employed to segue or lead into a flashback; it is also used in continuity montage with the jump cut, while at the same time it can represent the passage of long periods of time, especially when it is sequential. It is the one mark of punctuation in cinema that mixes images at the same time that it conjoins them.