Editing: An Introduction

What is editing?
Editing is the manipulation of time and space. On its most basic technical level, editing is simply the joining together of individual shots to create visual sequences. There are different types of edits that can be used between shots, and each can serve a different purpose or function within a narrative.

❖ The most common means of joining two shots together is the cut. In traditional filmmaking this involves literally trimming film with a sharp edge or razor and splicing shots together with tape or adhesive cement. Even though most editing is now carried out digitally and doesn’t actually involve the physical slicing of film the term “cut” is still used. Fittingly, most digital editing systems use razor or scissor icons to represent cutting.
❖ a fade out darkens the end of a shot, turning it into black; a fade in, by contrast, lightens a shot from black
❖ a dissolve briefly overlaps shots by superimposing the end of one shot onto the beginning of another
❖ a wipe switches from one shot to a second shot by moving a boundary line across the screen

Continuity Editing
The main editing technique to have evolved in narrative or story-based film is continuity editing, a core component of the Classical Hollywood Style. The basic purpose of continuity editing is to arrange shots together so they tell a story in a clear and easily understandable way. If footage is edited correctly in this style it should be seamless and we will be too focused on the story itself to notice the editing. That’s why this editing style is often called “invisible editing.” The role of the editor is to take a selection of different footage filmed earlier, and to weave it together, creating an apparently seamless narrative, complete with the illusion of space and time.

By sticking to a number of key principles, continuity editing succeeds in creating the appearance of continuous action, manipulating your viewing expectations and emotions, and ideally positioning you the viewer so that you become involved and engaged in the story.

The key techniques and principles used in continuity editing are:

1) 180 Degree Rule/Axis of Action
2) Eyeline Match
3) Shot/Reverse Shot
4) Point of view Cutting
5) Match on Action
6) Directional Continuity
7) Crosscutting
8) Master Shot
9) Coverage
10) Establishing Shot
11) Reestablishing Shot

1) 180 Degree Rule/Axis of Action – We’ve already mentioned that the role of continuity is to create a sense of unity in terms of space and time so that you as a viewer become fully involved in the story on a number of emotional levels. This also involves “positioning” you and giving you the best possible view of the
action. If you go to the theatre, the action takes place on a stage space surrounded by three walls. You, as a member of the audience are, in a sense, looking through an invisible fourth wall. Borrowing the same idea, the assumption in film is that shots will be filmed and cut together so that you, the audience, will always be on the same side of the story’s action – occupying the position of that invisible fourth wall. This creates an imaginary “180 degree axis of action” which acts as an invisible boundary for the direction of onscreen movements, character positions and glances in a scene and which the camera should not go beyond.

2) **Eyeline Match** – In the eyeline match, a character in one shot looks over at something that is offscreen (or out of the frame) and a cut to the next shot reveals the object the character is looking at. The line of the character’s glance has therefore “matched” the two separate shots together, creating a sense of coherence and spatial orientation. The point of view of you, the viewer, is successfully linked to the point of view of the main character, again increasing your identification with him/her and your emotional involvement in the film’s action.

3) **Shot/Reverse Shot** – This is a classical device which can be used in a number of ways, but most often is seen in basic dialogue sequences. The dialogue begins with a two shot of the participants in the scene. The cutting pattern then starts as a series of over the shoulder shots from one participant to the other.

4) **Point of view cutting** - this is a variant of the eyeline match. The structure is the same: a character looks off screen – we then cut to the object the character is looking at. However, what distinguishes point of view cutting is that the object is shown from the character’s optical vantage point – i.e. directly through the character’s eyes. This particular technique is even more powerful in terms of how effectively it places the audience in the position of the main character.

5) **Match on Action** – in the match on action cut, the cut from one shot to another occurs when an action is being performed, in which the action is continued from one shot to the next. It’s this continuity of the same action across the cut which creates coherence and orientation, helping you the viewer find your bearings.

6) **Directional Continuity** – this refers to the movements of characters/objects across the frame. For example, if a character exits the shot from the right of the screen, he should enter the next shot from the left of the screen, moving in the same direction.

7) **Crosscutting** – this technique is a primary narrative device and pieces together sequences that occur at the same time but in different places in order to increase narrative tension. The literary equivalent of this device is simple narrative transition such as “meanwhile” or “in another part of town”. Some films borrow these verbal clues by using intertitles or voiceover narration.

8) **Master shot** - an uninterrupted shot, usually taken from a long or full shot range, that contains an entire scene

9) **Coverage** - extra shots of a scene that can be used to bridge transitions in case the planned footage fails to edit as planned. Every time the camera/equipment is moved creates a new setup. Coverage avoids monotony and creates meaning.

10) **Establishing shot** - usually an ELS or LS/WS at the beginning of a scene, provides the viewer with the context of the subsequent closer shots/coverage

11) **Re-establishing shot** - a return to an initial establishing shot within a scene, acting as a reminder of the physical context of the closer shots