

**ARTS2090 ESSAY - JAMES ROY ASTON - z3162750**

**David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson cite Eisenstein as the basis for their claim that ‘discontinuity editing’, in contrast to ‘classical continuity editing’, invites the viewer to make ‘emotional and conceptual connections’ (*Film Art*, p. 342). What do you think they mean by that statement? In your answer you should engage in a detailed analysis of *two* relevant films.**

Bordwell and Thompson in *Film Art*, define the conventions of ‘classical continuity editing’ largely as a series of ‘invisible’ rules and techniques that heighten our attention to, and connectedness with, an uninterrupted character driven narrative development. (Bordwell, 261) Editing cuts serve primarily as spatial/temporal ‘links’, and any emotional or conceptual connections are experienced both vicariously through the characters’ phenomenology of the story world, and the camera’s representation and shot choices through which the director constructs and guides meaning.

‘Discontinuity editing’ on the other hand, removes the viewer from a passive spectator role by disorienting traditional spatial/temporal relations with ‘visible’ editing techniques, jarring continuity and creating a narrational ambiguity that forces the viewer to piece together narrative meaning. By violating continuity rules and drawing attention to these expressive techniques, the viewer must synthesise a different conceptual understanding of the sequenced shots and the relationships of characters on screen, playing with our sense of subjectivity, emotional empathy and alienation.

While this continuity/discontinuity dichotomy is more evident during the early development of American/European cinematic language, it is problematic to separate editing from other contexts (sound, acting, mis-en-scene) in modern films in order to define what best elicits ‘emotional and conceptual connections’. We shall see in the analysis of Hitchcock’s *Rear Window* (1954) and Godard’s *A bout de souffle* (*Breathless*) (1960) that these films successfully combine techniques from both editing styles.

Continuity editing evolved from the climate of Hollywood's mass-production studios in the early 1900's where the use of edits in linking narrative scenes satisfied an ever expanding audience for longer and more dynamic films. (Bordwell, 456) Edwin Porter pioneered early techniques in the *The Life on an American Fireman (1902)*, that incorporated newsreel footage, a close-up and intercuts, further developing a spatial/temporal linearity in *The Great Train Robbery (1903)*, where spatial/temporal change is implied by the juxtaposition of two shots, constructing a dynamic narrative. (Dancyger, 3) Porter clarified film narrative in his work, but D.W. Griffith learned how to formalise the juxtaposition of shots into a language of linearity that conveys realism and emotion. Griffith varied shots for impact, including the extreme long shot, the close-up, the cutaway, and the tracking shot, including parallel editing, all of which he employed in *Birth of a Nation (1915)* to great emotional effect through dynamic pacing. (ibid, 4) Other continuity principles such as match-on-action, eyeline match and shot reverse/shot had been established by the 1920's, formalising 'classical continuity editing' as the standardised output of Hollywood studios (Bordwell, 458) up until the introduction of sound.

D.W. Griffith was the first great international filmmaker, as his films filled the vacuum of European production during World War I, casting his editing innovations as a prime influence of, and subject of study for filmmakers. (Dancyger, 26) One such critic of Griffith, Pudovkin, forwarded 'constructive editing' through the 'plastic synthesis' of shots as building blocks to contextually invite different conceptions and affect spectators. (ibid, 20) Pudovkin worked with Kulevshov at the State Film School on these montage experiments in constructing continuity to create the now mythic Kuleshov effect, while Vertov, working with the Soviet news reels *Kinopravda*, (Film-truth) created *Man With a Movie Camera (1929)*, experimenting with the manipulative power of editing to convey the nonrealism, idiosyncrasies, and technical elements of film, through a self-reflexive, free associative style. (Bordwell, 413) In Western Europe, German Expressionism relied heavily on Mis-en-scene graphic stylisation, in *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*, (Dancyger, 5) and French

Impressionists used point-of-view cutting and rhythmic editing to suggest the phenomenology and fantasy of a character in *Smiling Madame Beudet* (1923) (Bordwell, 462) while French Surrealism, exemplified in Dali/Bunuel's *Un Chien d'Andalous* (1929) reacted against Griffith's narrative continuity in favour of dialectic editing, counterpoint and asynchronism, juxtaposing random and shocking images to destroy meaning by visual dissociation and discontinuity. (Dancyger, 25)

Of these early European filmmakers, Eisenstein remains the most prolific on film theory: the dialectic and conceptual approach to discontinuity editing where emotions/ideas are not innate within the shots themselves, but through the collision of shots within the montage sequence that requires spectator synthesis. (Bordwell, 284) Eisenstein attempted to translate the lessons of Griffith and the ideology of Karl Marx into a singular audience experience where editing functions as the organising principle for film over narrative development, in which its application has five components: metric, rhythmic, tonal, overtonal and intellectual montage. (Eisenstein, 73) Metric Montage refers to the length of shots relative to each another, shortening shots decreases absorption time and increases emotional tension. Rhythmic Montage is the juxtaposition of matching action and screen direction, portraying conflict through oppositional forces. Tonal Montage establishes the 'melodic-emotional' feel of the scene while Overtonal Montage combines the previous three forms. Finally Intellectual Montage introduces concepts, often through diegetical insert, into an emotionally charged scene. (Eisenstein, p 73-82) While Eisenstein discovered the visceral power of montage editing and visual composition through his first three films, the incorporation of sound and the reappraisal of the long take heralded the end of pure editing styles as the modern movie, including *Ivan the Terrible* (1944), synthesised various editing techniques with traditional cinematic elements to invite emotional/conceptual relations.

Bordwell & Thompsons statement that continuity editing as an 'invisible' art, subservient to narrative development and its adherence to spatial/temporal conventions, displaces the editors choices as an expressive art to mere formulation, and in the case of Hitchcock and *Rear Window*, the 'pre-cut' picture (Orpen, 18) is to a large extent a continuity editing driven film. However, it is teeming with complex editing patterns surrounding the Point of View sequences, that are based on alternation/repetition and used for the emphasis and communication of characters emotion and the audiences involvement, employing a form of a cinematic anti-Kuleshov experiment with character reactions. (ibid, 42) Continuity conventions are used to reinforce our connection with Jeff's (and increasingly Lisa and Stella's) subjective perspective of the courtyard window scenes as variations in shot scale grow closer as the story action intensifies (through the use of PoV binocular and telephoto lens frames) monitoring Jeff's rising/waning interest in his neighbours. Shot length decreases overall, leading into the film climax when Thornwald becomes aware of Jeff's voyeurism, the dominance of vision is transferred to Thornwald as we see Jeff from another persons perspective for the first time, as this jarring transition is signified with the optical flares from the lightbulb, heightening a sense of emotional disconnection from Thornwald and empathy with Jeff.

Temporally, *Rear Window* is tightly structured around four days, with fade-ins/outs as temporal markers. For example a fade to black separates two close-ups of Jeff's wristwatch, yet also functions to signify the films pacing, (Eight fades on Wednesday as opposed to two on Saturday which is accompanied by rapid cutting (ibid, 42)) and importantly what Jeff has not seen. (Thornwald's other woman, Lisa's feelings for him) Fades thus confer a superiority to the spectator allowing us to draw emotional story connections. Hitchcock also makes use of spatial jump cuts (as opposed to spatial/temporal) in dialogue scenes (Stella massaging Jeff and Lisa's dinner scene) to empathetically emphasise the impact of dialogue on character bearing, often violating the 30 degree rule of camera movement, as dialogue becomes the central organising tenant for editing. Sound

plays an important continuity element as diegetic music (the radio or composer) is layered over scenes during emotionally charged moments (during the Lisa dinner scene or when Lisa is in Thornwalds apartment) as here we see the visual editing rests largely on the cues from the soundtrack to maintain rhythm and tension in the audience. It is in the combination of Stewart's expressive features, lighting, camera shot scales, soundtrack and the reworking of continuity structure that create the mosaic from which the audience infers meaning and emotion.

If *Rear Window* showcases Hitchcock's experiments with the Point of View conventions of continuity editing in an acute awareness of audience spectatorship, then *Breathless* flaunts its stylised discontinuity in the face of the established rules by contrasting hyper-editing (profusion of jump cuts) with the avoidance of editing. (long, often mobile takes) (ibid, 118) Throughout the opening scenes of *Breathless*, Godard plays with the conventions spatial/temporal continuity and shot sequencing: there is no establishing shot, only as medium shot of a newspaper to reveal Michel, as eye-line matches between Michel and the woman go nowhere, indicating that the characters are spatially disconnected. In the sequence after Michel spots the police, most continuity rules (180 line, 30 rule, conflicting graphics, shot scale) are broken, and while curious, does not seem to displace the audience, as eyeline matches are maintained until the shot scale jumps from medium to the extreme close of the gun barrel. These discontinuities, in particular gratuitous jump cuts, are clearly intentional, but their purpose is unclear, they are more bewildering conceptually than they are visually.

Elliptical cutting is often used in continuity editing to excise 'dead time' and speed up narrative action, and there are some instances of this in *Breathless*, yet stand alone spatial/temporal jumps often seem unnecessary given that they only slightly shorten the film duration (of which Godard had to remove an hour from his original cut) and serve no purpose other than to draw attention to

the technique and its contextual use in lengthier sequences or point to Godard as an ‘auteur’ or an amateur. (Raskin, 1-4) During the RN7 highway drive, four jumps cuts propel the scene forwards towards Michel’s goal in Paris as he overtakes other vehicles, highlighting Michel’s recklessness and impatience. Notably, as Michel drives Patricia through Paris, Goddard tossed a coin to decide whether Patricia or Michel should be cut altogether, (as the original scene followed shot/reverse-shot continuity) (Orpen, 76) resulting in an absurd amount of spatial and temporal jump cuts that are smoothed over by the rhythm of Michel’s singing. Another contextual approach is Patricia’s meeting with Van Doude, as jump cuts chop up his anecdote signaling Patricia’s mental disconnection, and perhaps Godard’s impatience with the Van Doude as a foil to Michel, and the actors performance and delivery. (ibid, 77)

In contrast to *Rear Windows*, where long takes serve primarily as master establishing shots roving around the courtyard to collective the windows and their story worlds, long takes in *Breathless* impart the feeling of restlessness and momentum that characterises Michel, and affords the actors space and time to move and speak freely where previously the proliferation of jump cuts serves to fragment and disconnect. In the Swedish model’s apartment, for example, after informing Michel of her betrayal to the police, she paces around the loft as the camera follows her, after which Michel paces the room. Both characters espouse difficult emotions towards each other and avoid eye-contact, a feat difficult to represent in the shot/reverse-shot tradition, yet the circular form long take captures perfectly the shift in energy as Patricia paces and Michel, for once, seems drained. The long shots also serve to alleviate the potential tediousness of inaction in the travel agency sequence in stark contrast to the bustling energy of the Champs-Elysees linear sequence. The editing of *Breathless* mixes different styles to vary the momentum of the narrative, hint at characters inner states and simultaneously dislocates and connects the audience to the central themes, not so much

mirroring Michel's reckless mobile existence but providing a Manifesto of Godard's idea for a new cinema that rejects continuity conventions in favour of more abstracted meaning.

Cognitive attention studies show the cut between shots triggers an Orienting Response that slows the body while increasing the senses ability to acquire information provided there is some similarity between shots. However if the degree of discontinuity is too great, a heightened awareness of the cut leads to the deterioration of the viewers ability to comprehend and remember the films content.

(Smith, 40-2) If in cognitive attention the blink facilitates an internal separation or computation of thought then;

“A shot presents us with an idea, or a sequence of ideas, and the cut is a ‘blink’ that separates and punctuates those ideas. It is important to emphasise the cut by *itself* does not create the ‘blink moment’... If the cut is well-placed, however, the more extreme the discontinuity... the more thorough the effect of punctuation will be.” (Murch, 63)

This is the crux of the Bordwell and Thompson statement: ‘classical continuity editing’ strives to exchange our reality for that of the dream-like flow of narrative, to convince us of it's emotional and conceptual impact with the transparency of the fourth wall, while ‘discontinuity editing’ removes the veil of cinematic grammar, displacing us from the films content to reappraise the shot/sequence within a larger emotional and conceptual frame that the movie as a whole presents. The claims’ basis in Eisenstein’s montage theory is sound, however the dichotomy between dis/continuity is more readily applied to the pre-sound era of pure editing styles, as modern films appropriate and tinker with editing styles as just one of the expressive forms that meld with sound, acting, mis-en-scene and cultural contexts to best convey and invite ‘emotion and conceptual connection.’

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Bordwell, David and Thompson, Kristin. *Film Art: An Introduction* McGraw-Hill: New York, 1993
- Dancyger, Ken. *The Technique of Film and Video Editing* Focal Press: Oxford, 2011
- Eisenstein, Sergei. (ed, tr. Leyda, Jay) *Film Form: Essays in Film Theory* Harcourt: New York, 1977
- Millar, Gavin and Reisz, Rachel. *The Technique of Film Editing* Focal Press: London and New York, 1968
- Murch Walter. *In the Blink of an Eye* Silman-James Press: Los Angeles, 2001
- Orpen, Valerie. *Film Editing: The Art of the Expressive Wallflower*: London, 2003
- Raskin, Richard. 'Five explanations for the jump cuts in Godard's *Breathless*' *The Art of Film Editing* P.O.V No.6. ([http://pov.imv.au.dk/issue\\_06/section\\_1/artc10.html](http://pov.imv.au.dk/issue_06/section_1/artc10.html)) 31/04
- Smith, Tim J. *An Attentional Theory of Continuity Editing* University of Edinburgh, 2005

## FILMOGRAPHY

- Rear Window* Dir. Alfred Hitchcock, 1954
- A bout de souffle* Dir. Jean-Luc Godard, 1960
- Birth of a Nation* Dir. D.W. Griffith, 1916
- The Great Train Robbery* Dir. Edwin S. Porter, 1903
- Ivan the Terrible* Dir. Sergei Eisenstein, 1944
- The Life on an American Fireman* Dir. Edwin S. Porter, 1902
- Man With a Movie Camera* Dir. Dziga Vertov, 1929
- Smiling Madame Beudet* Dir. Germaine Dulac, 1923
- Un Chien d'Andalou* Dir. Luis Bunuel, 1929