Roger Crittenden

The Thames and Hudson
Manual of Film Editing

with 67 illustrations
5 The language of editing: giving your material form and refining its meaning

6 Sound in editing

7 The laboratory in post-production

8 Film editing and the future: film or video?

Appendix: additional and contractual obligations of the editor

Glossary

Acknowledgments

Bibliography

Index

Introduction

In 1924 the painter Fernand Léger, fired with enthusiasm for the ‘limitless plastic possibilities’ of cinema, had this to say about film-makers: ‘In spite of their unquestionable talent they are caught between a scenario that must remain a means and the moving image that must be the end. They often confuse the two things. . . . Nevertheless, their means are infinite, unlimited; they have this amazing power to personify, to give a complete life to a fragment. The close-up is their alphabet, they can give plastic identity to a detail. . . . Before this invention you never had the shadow of an idea about the personality of fragments.’ (Bulletin de l’Effort Moderne)

It is this ‘power to personify, to give a complete life to a fragment’, that gives film editing its important function in the craft of the cinema. If these fragments were left unstructured, film would remain an exciting toy. By adding the opportunity to juxtapose and control them, editing completes the cycle of film. Learning to translate the words on paper into effective visual expression is the most important of all lessons. The knowledge of how editing works is the absolute prerequisite of every attempt to make a film.

If a film is to succeed, the writing and direction must already contain the pulse which signifies the way editing can breathe life into the material. To describe the close-up as the film-maker’s alphabet is too simple an expression of the basis of film language. Certainly it is important to be aware of the relative values of the various kinds of shot, from long shot to close-up, but to deny the contribution of lighting, camera movement, art direction, performance and the sound track is to exclude most of the armoury at our disposal. From the point of view of the editor it is important to understand how each of these elements contributes to film. Anthony Wollner wrote in American Cinemeditor (Spring 1965): ‘An editor need not be a writer but he must know story structure; he need not be a cameraman but he must understand pictorial composition and the compatibility of angles; he need not be a director, but he must feel the actors’ performances and the dramatic or comedy pacing as surely as the director.’

So the contribution of editing to film-making is a two-way process. All the important contributors to a film before it is cut must appreciate the way editing works and the editor must realize how each of the other crafts function to produce the material he works with. It is this mutual understanding that lies at the root of all well-conceived and well-realized films. The director must be in control of the whole process, otherwise the chances are that the cutting room will function merely as a casualty ward applying sticking plaster to the accidents that occurred during shooting.

It is this need to place editing in context that has dictated the structure of this book. Before we confront the process of editing we must look first at the historical development of the language, and then at ways in which
various aspects of shooting can help editing to function properly. Then, after having described the cutting room and editing equipment, and the chronological sequence of the process, we examine the language of editing and the way it has been applied by a number of films. The last chapter looks to the future: the choice between film and video.

As you embark on this journey there is one important factor to bear in mind. The opportunities to be vulgar, slick and facetious are manifest in every cutting decision. The temptation to manipulate the material that you are given is not easy to resist. After all, celluloid is divorced from the reality it has captured. We can feel safe with two-dimensional images which do not answer back when we play our tricks with them. Editing is rather like bullfighting: it is all too tempting to go for loud and frequent olés from the audience. Even with well-made films the need for discipline and restraint in the editing is an overwhelming responsibility. The editor must be the conscience that protects the director and his audience from indulgence and the reduction of life to the superficial. Even if film functions as an escape for the audience, that escape must be grounded in life-enhancing attitudes.

When you have learned the skills of cutting well enough to make a proper contribution to films you edit, you must still remember that the way you apply those skills will always be more important than the skills themselves. The craft is only a means to an end and not an end in itself.

It is the object of this chapter to point out a few of the crucial developments in the history of film which have impinged on the role that editing plays. No definitive history of this kind has been published in English and all we can do here is to scratch the surface, knowing that our chief objective is to encourage an awareness of some of the factors which have affected the application of the craft of editing. If we were to chart the connections over the last eighty years between developments in film language that have impinged on the function of editing the resulting diagram would be very confusing. Arrows would have to go back and forward in time and sideways across different types of film and individual examples. There has been no single line of progression: indeed, all that can be stated with any degree of conviction is that all cinema can be traced to one of two roots. At the turn of the century the Lumière brothers and Georges Méliès were pioneering the alternate ways that film could develop. The Lumières were demonstrating how events could be the sufficient basis of film reality and Méliès was showing how manipulation of reality could become a film event.

It is a remarkable fact that the basic language of the cinema was established within ten years of the first practical demonstration of projected moving pictures. Although it is common practice to cite the films of D.W. Griffith between 1908 and 1914 as the first to contain the elements which allow us to juxtapose different types of shot when cutting, most of these elements had previously been 'discovered' around the turn of the century by a group of British film-makers. These pioneers (R.W. Paul, Cecil Hepworth, James Williamson, G.A. Smith and Alfred Collins) incorporated close-ups, sequencing of action, parallel action, variation of set-up and camera movement in their films. In British Creators of Film Technique (1948) Georges Sadoul suggested that these early film-makers were in fact following principles of sequence and
THE SILENT ERA

This sequencing with slides can be regarded as the direct antecedent of film editing. But in its early days, film derived its impact from other traditions, including theatre and literature, which might have been expected to dictate completely the way the new medium communicated. However, one important factor made it imperative for film to develop a language that was not dependent upon these other forms: for thirty years (until 1928) film was silent, and title-cards were never a complete substitute for the subtleties of story-telling and drama which had been developed over centuries. There was a deadness in images that depended upon the action in each scene usually being shown from one point of view. Without words as a vehicle for complex narrative, adherence to the three unities of Greek tragedy—time, place and action—was always going to inhibit the development of film language. Imitation of the theatre's prosenium view further limited cinematic to little more than a series of mute tableaux.

Almost unconsciously, the early film-makers sensed that it was necessary to find ways of controlling rhythm and pace, establishing mood, providing emphasis and focusing attention in the scene. As long as the length of films was restricted to one reel (about 12 minutes) and title-cards could be liberally interspersed, the lazy or uncreative director could get away with one camera position that contained the action of each segment. However, the longer film, containing more than just a series of incidents, was bound to put pressure on this simple form.

THE CONTRIBUTION OF D. W. GRIFFITH

Although other early film-makers had used many of the elements of film language, it was without doubt Griffith's incorporation of such elements into his films which propelled the commercial film forward and gave it a legitimate and coherent form. The techniques used by Griffith—summarized below—are important because they assumed the need for an editing process.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>DATE</th>
<th>FILM</th>
<th>TECHNIQUE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1908</td>
<td>Adventures of Dollie</td>
<td>Flashback</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1908</td>
<td>For Love of Gold</td>
<td>Full shot of two characters</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1908</td>
<td>After Many Years</td>
<td>Close-up of one character and cutback to character being thought of in previous close-up</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1909</td>
<td>The Lonely Villa</td>
<td>Parallel action</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1910</td>
<td>Ramona</td>
<td>Extreme long shot</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1911</td>
<td>The Lonedale Operator</td>
<td>Moving camera, rapid cutting, crosscutting, parallel development and close-up in detail</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1912</td>
<td>The Massacre</td>
<td>Tracking shot</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Iris Barry delineated Griffith's achievements in her monograph, *D. W. Griffith: American Film Master* (1940). Ernst Lindgren spells them out even more clearly in *The Art of the Film* (1948): 'Griffith instinctively saw the coherence he could achieve on the screen [through editing] even though his material was fragmentary, filmed at different times in different places with a variety of shots but all coming together to make one scene; [Griffith] succeeded in building up in the minds of his audience an association of ideas welded with such logic and charged with such emotional momentum that its truth was not questioned.'

Thus it became apparent that it was possible to make complex choices about each moment and to make those segments cohere. By having the courage and perception to relate his camera position to precisely what he wanted the audience to see at a given moment, Griffith proved that the cinema could develop into a subtle and complex means of expression.

Consider the alternatives open to the film-maker as a consequence of this establishment of the basic language. Let us take as our example the filming of a scene between two people. In 1908 Griffith started out as a director in the knowledge that the conventional film would show the whole scene from beginning to end from a static viewpoint in front of the scene that included the whole area of the action (usually a three-walled set). When he and his cameraman Billy Bitzer decided to move in to a closer shot of one character the convention was broken. When the studio bosses saw the result they complained that this was unacceptable because they had paid for the whole actor! As soon as this closer shot has been seen it is no great step to show a closer shot of the other character. Having done this you can intercut the two. The size of these closer shots can subsequently be varied.

Perhaps the greatest step in this exploration of filmic space is the moment when the director realizes that he is inside the area established in the wide shot. It is as if a member of the audience at a theatrical performance had stepped on to the stage. The camera has to fulfill intents and purposes become a character in the scene. So the dynamics of film language come to depend upon the sense that each member of the audience has of being present in the action through the agency of the camera.

THE CONVENTION

Although this concept goes beyond the general grammar that Griffith incorporated, it is important to acknowledge that it was his opening up of the possibilities that led the way to the establishment of the complete panoply of shots and editing alternatives which we now take for granted. However, we should also be aware of the restrictions that he and others were imposing on the future of conventional cinema at the same time.

Most cinema, ironically, still proceeds as if Griffith were leaning over the shoulder of the director. Each director prepares the shooting script of a film with a very basic assumption in mind: that for each scene there exists an ideal point of view which establishes the position of the camera for the master shot. This ideal position is usually related to the best way of staging the action to allow the focus of the scene to be adequately encompassed. This establishes a plane of action within a two-dimensional frame of reference. Every subsequent shot that is incorporated must refer
to the axis of this establishing shot. The only ways of changing that axis are by character movement or camera movement. Thus cinema has created its own artificial form.

This development of a convention dependent on the way space is treated is of utmost importance because it provides us with the elements that editing normally uses in manipulating the film material. As we have seen, Griffith was the first to make disparate elements (shots) cohere into convincing sequences. The culmination of his efforts came in two epic films: Birth of a Nation (1915) and Intolerance (1916). According to Barry: ‘The film Intolerance is of extreme importance in the history of cinema. It is the end and justification of that whole school of American cinematography based on the terse cutting and disjunctive assembly of lengths of film.’

THE RUSSIAN INFLUENCE

Griffith had an enormous influence on the post-revolution generation of Russian directors. Barry states that it was ‘from his example that they derived their characteristic staccato shots, their measured and accurate rhythms and their skill in joining pictorial images together with a view to the emotional overtones of each so that two images in conjunction convey more than the sum of their visual content’. In 1919, when the Moscow film school was established, Griffith’s films were being shown in Russia for the first time – Lenin himself, aware of the immense value of film to the new Bolshevik state, personally arranged the wide distribution of Intolerance. However, Lindgren points out that there was a deeper consciousness developing there: ‘It was the directors of the Soviet Union who were the first to understand the full significance of this fact [of film truth] and to exploit it; for editing, as the Russians saw, is nothing less than the deliberate guidance of the thoughts and convictions of the spectator.’ Lindgren goes on: ‘They clearly perceived... that editing derived its power... from the fact that a succession of shots involved a complex set of relationships between them, relationships of idea, of duration, of physical movement and of form.’

Among this generation of directors, all of whom had come under the influence of Griffith, were V. I. Pudovkin, Lev Kuleshov, Dziga Vertov and Sergei Eisenstein. Kuleshov’s experiments in montage and the writing and practice of Eisenstein and Pudovkin are still witness to their achievements. A close study of their work in print and on film is essential to any self-respecting director or editor.

They began to explore the significance of editing. In his writings, Vertov rejected all of the artifices involved in film-making except editing. According to Pudovkin, Kuleshov believed that film art begins from the moment the director starts to join together the various pieces of film and demonstrated his concept by experiments in the juxtaposition of simple shots. By cutting together the face of a well-known Russian actor, Ivan Mosjoukine, and various other shots, he was able to prove that the meaning of the combined images was a result of their being juxtaposed. Audiences were convinced that the actor was expressing alternately joy, sadness and other emotions in different scenes when in fact Kuleshov had used the same piece of film on each occasion. It was this creative use of fragments that so excited the Russians.

EISENSTEIN

Thanks to a student, Vladimir Nizhny, we have a record of Eisenstein’s approach to the possible alternatives in film style. In his book Lessons with Eisenstein (1962) Nizhny gives a detailed and lively account of classes he attended in the 1930s. He describes intense work on the staging of a particular scene which Eisenstein used as a workshop example. It is the killing of the old money lender by Raskolnikov in Dostoyevsky’s Crime and Punishment. After exploring many ways of breaking down the scene Eisenstein convinced his students of the feasibility of handling it in one long developing shot. By choreographing his two characters he was able to suggest a way of sustaining the drama through pacing and visual emphasis without resorting to editing.

Eisenstein summarized the work he had done with the class thus: ‘It seems to me that the worry that was affecting many of you at the start, that for us to stage everything in one shot would be boring and uninteresting, has proved unjustified. . . In our work we have managed to fix all the striking and critical moments in a corresponding close view without changing the camera set-up... you have been convinced that mise-en-scene contains in itself all the elements concerned with editing break-up shots.’

Eisenstein then coined the term ‘mise-en-shot’ to describe the way staging the action carefully can provide all the dramatic emphasis that would conventionally be conveyed by cutting. His object was not to convince his students that the one-shot solution is necessarily the aim, but that proper staging of any scene will reveal the details of dramatic development that allow the director to decide how to photograph the
natural therefore to use the cut as a device for emphasis. The lack of sound restricted the methods of conveying subtleties of narrative. The close-up was a natural substitute. The camera was normally static, and its lenses did not have much depth of focus. Again, cutting could overcome this. Performers were either theatrically trained or lacked a sense of the needs of the camera. The cut could compensate for this by either playing down their theatricality or showing the detail that conveyed the desired interpretation of the scene. All or some of these restrictions were occasionally overcome by the best directors, but in normal practice editing was an essential part of compensating for them.

The irony was that the most far-reaching revolution, the coming of sound, at first actually tended to inhibit development. Since it was not possible to convey all essential details of narrative in words, all but the most disciplined and creative directors could depend upon the verbal as a substitute for the visual. This tended to inhibit the imaginative application of editing and to neutralize film style. The tendency continues to this day: most television drama still depends upon people talking to each other, and television documentary substitutes narration for a truly cinematic presentation.

For purely technical reasons, it is not really surprising that initially the response to sound was unimaginative. In its very early days sound-recording technology was extremely primitive. To obtain a usable track, microphones had to be placed very close to the artists and the camera had to remain static. It was difficult to accommodate variations in voice level and the artists could only move if the microphone position was adjustable. Also, early sound recording was virtually non-selective, so acoustics and the control of background sound were crucial.

The result was that most dramatic films in the early 1930s were as artificial and as 'staged' as silent films had tended to be in the early 1920s. It was left to film-makers who were working in areas other than the dramatic film to point the way to future developments.

ROBERT FLAHERTY AND THE DOCUMENTARY MOVEMENT

One of the most important of these film-makers was the American Robert Flaherty. Known as 'the Father of Documentary' his significance was greater still. As is often true of those who exert a major influence on a new medium, Flaherty had few collaborators, preferring to struggle along his own idiosyncratic path. From Nanook of the North (released in 1922) to Louisiana Story (1948) Flaherty worked at refining his approach to documentary film in an uncompromising fashion. Although the 'authenticity' of his films has been overstated, there is no doubt that the origins of the continuing debate about the attitudes of the film-maker to his subject and the ethics of how film material should be treated, date back to Flaherty. This is especially true of editing. When we cut a documentary film, our concern to respect the people and events that we manipulate is due in no small part to Flaherty.

STEMMING directly from Flaherty but adding its own dimension to the development of film language was the Documentary Movement inspired by John Grierson. Members of this movement were always eager to use editing as a prominent plank in their creative interpretation of reality.
Music, poetry and visual montage were essential ingredients in the fabrication of their documentary films. They were never concerned with denying the artifice involved though they would have argued that their material and the structure of it still retained the spirit of its 'reality'.

It is a salutary comment on the barrenness of the entertainment film of the 1930s and early 1940s to remember that much of the most exciting and influential work in film was done through public sponsorship in Britain. Grierson masterminded the GPO film unit and through it nurtured a body of talent that culminated both in works of social significance and in the poetic cinema of Humphrey Jennings. By encouraging the involvement of painters, composers and poets, Grierson affirmed that film could develop into a far more significant means of communication than that suggested by mainstream cinema.

CHALLENGING THE CONVENTION

The reaction against the form of the entertainment film was not confined to the documentarists. Another explosion was that set off by the surrealist movement, exemplified by Luis Buñuel's Un Chien Andalou (1928) and L'Age d'Or (1931). He and others demonstrated that the conjunction of images could rely for coherence on symbolic meaning rather than the linear development of a narrative.

Writing in the late 1940s and 1950s, André Bazin pointed to other explorers who were freeing the cinema from slavish adherence to conventional technique. His heroes from past eras were Flaherty, Friedrich Murnau and Eric von Stroheim and he saw the work of Jean Renoir in the 1930s as continuing the line of realism which he so admired. The central point for Bazin is contained in two quotations from the essays collected in his Qu'est-ce que le cinéma? (1959–61): 'When the essence of an event is dependent on the simultaneous presence of two or more factors in the action, cutting is forbidden'; and 'The editing of Kuleshov, of Eisenstein and of Gance didn't show the event: they made an allusion to it.'

It is an oversimplification to consider that Bazin completely disagreed with cutting. His importance lies in the fact that he made us aware that all technique, including editing, has the tendency to intrude between the audience and the film. His effect was to free a whole generation, especially the French directors of the New Wave, from adherence to the neutral style of mainstream cinema. He saw that every intelligent film-maker has an obligation to respect his material and his personal vision, and to use the techniques at his disposal to create a style appropriate to his subject. Bazin's contribution is clearly and cogently analysed by Gavin Millar in The Technique of Film Editing (1967).

Both Renoir with The Rules of the Game (1939) and Orson Welles with Citizen Kane (1941) confirmed for Bazin that it was possible, indeed essential, to treat style as a support to each particular film rather than to accept any preconceived notions of form. The film-maker thus becomes an explorer rather than a presenter. The film should be evidence of the journey not a report of the findings.

CAMERA-STYLO AND CINEMA-VÉRITÉ

Such a release from the shackles of convention was bound to be reflected in subsequent work. Both documentary and fiction exhibited this newfound freedom in the late 1950s and 1960s. Naturally, French film-makers were at the root of much of this development. Alexandre Astruc, a friend of Bazin, coined the term 'Camera-Stylo' (the camera as pen) to describe the way he felt the director should be the direct author of his work.

In the 1960s the Cinema-Vérité movement attempted in documentary to use the dynamic of real events with a minimum of editing manipulation. 16mm lightweight cameras and recorders made it possible to film in actual situations without the camera dictating how events were shown. It was felt that film had by and large, and quite wrongly, become slave to the camera. However, in practice the films of Chris Marker and Jean Rouch in France and Richard Leacock and others in America, for instance, did not reduce editing to the minimal function of joining bits of 'reality' together that seems to be implied by this approach.

Unless it is envisaged that there is no limit to the final length of the film certain compromises have to be reached either about what to shoot and/or what to cut. Several solutions were found by the proponents of Cinema-Vérité. One was to start with a question. Thus Rouch and Edgar Morin decided in Chronique d'un Été (1961) to build the film around asking people in Paris if they were happy. By using this specific question they were able to structure the film around responses and the way the responses suggested further material to be filmed. Thus the film had a quasi-organic development, even though Rouch and Morin were not above contriving meetings and encounters that seemed to grow out of material already obtained. Another 'compromise' developed by the movement was to structure films around a coherent event: the reality to be filmed provided the basis for the film's structure even before the cameras started turning. This was especially true of the Leacock-Pennebaker films: Primary (1960), Football (1961), The Chair (1962) and
their attitudes to editing had certain things in common. Much of their work demonstrates a refreshing openness that defies the rules and throws over a slavish adherence to the convention. By having the language at their fingertips they were able to use its grammar in a dynamic way rather than reproducing a sterile form.

To take one example: the dissolve had become the device for conveying the passage of time. Truffaut amongst others questioned both the need to use the dissolve in this way and even the need to signal time passing so conventionally. This released the device to other uses, especially to convey emotional connections between the content of images. It also allowed the simple cut to exist as a transitional device, controlling the rhythm of the juxtaposed shots in such a way that the dissolve became redundant.

The New Wave achieved a great deal more by questioning the basic language of cinema. Until the 1960s, dramatic film had assumed that every scene had to contain narrative development. It seems simple now to ask why such weight should be applied to every cut. But just as simply the answer then was that there was no inherent reason except that the convention demanded it. Once released from this prime function editing can be used to do much more. Suddenly traditional drama seems an unnecessarily restrictive means of expression. We have at our disposal a medium which, while continuing to tell stories, can also concentrate on states of mind and the exploration of relationships that are not dependent upon conventional narrative development. Out of this freedom came Michelangelo Antonioni's L'Avventura (1959) which is based on no more story than a dilatory search for a missing woman but which, within that slight framework, is actually concerned with portraying the empty lives of a group of upper-class Italians. Godard used some elements of the thriller genre in Pierrot le Fou (1965) to explore attitudes to surface reality and some of the influences on our life in capitalist society. Truffaut used a triangle of relationships in Jules et Jim (1961) where the events are dependent on nothing more substantial than the whims of the heroine Catherine.

---

6 A still from Chronique d'un Été, a film in which Jean Rouch and Edgar Morin consciously explored documentary style and technique.

January (1963) are all good examples of subjects that rely on the dynamic contained in the situation being filmed for the basis of their central structure. Perhaps the most important logical conclusion to be reached from this style of film-making is that there is every reason for director and cameraman (and editor) to be the same person. This was exactly the conclusion reached by Albert Mayes after shooting for Godard on the latter's segment of Paris vue par... (1963).

THE NEW WAVE

Godard was one of the directors who came to be known as le Nouvelle Vague (the New Wave). What these directors shared was a desire to release film-making from the inhibitions that had been built into it by the pressure of commercial and industrial modes of production. The Italian Neo-Realists had opened up the options by rejecting the artificiality of studio production, and the New Wave directors were further encouraged by Cinema-Verité, whose documentary film-makers had taken to the streets with minimal equipment and no obligations except to their own ideas and predilections.

The result, in the work of Claude Chabrol, Godard, Alain Resnais and François Truffaut, amongst others, was a new questioning of the language and structuring of narrative film. Most of them had worked on the magazine Cahiers du Cinéma, edited by Bazin in its early days, and had been constant visitors to the Paris Cinémathèque where Henri Langlois nurtured their interests and enthusiasm. So not only were they soaked in movies, but they had also learned at the master's knee the need for a coherent and consistent approach to their craft. Their particular styles and approaches to cinema were too divergent to have stemmed directly from Bazin's precepts in their particular approaches to cinema. However,
EXPLORING THE BOUNDARIES

To some extent Resnais’s exploration of time and memory, especially in L’Année Dernière à Marienbad (1961), represents the extreme of this new-found freedom. We do not have to like his film to realize that it is important to understand the driving force behind such an approach: a desire to use cinema for more than straightforward story-telling. Resnais is far more interested in aspects of our mental life and sees cinema as capable of demonstrating the way our thought processes layer reactions to the real world in a constantly evolving way. He has confronted the basic linear nature of film and demands that we too become aware that past, present and future are not blocked off from each other.

Resnais’s films are not popular. The demands they make of the viewer make it predictable that the mass audience will always reject them. This does not make his films irrelevant. The exploration of any medium will always be reflected in the development of the mainstream in the future. As far as editing is concerned, the eb and flow of style can be predicted to progress gingerly towards the inclusion of more subtle and sophisticated techniques. Since the New Wave, individual directors working in the commercial cinema have incorporated elements that seemed avant-garde in the 1960s. Others have continued to exploit avenues of their own.

Robert Bresson, for instance, has pursued an ascetic and pure style that eschews much still espoused by conventional film. The Hungarian Miklos Janúsz has taken the mise-en-shot principle to the extreme of 8-minute takes, choreographing camera and performers to substitute for the cut. Meanwhile, in some observational documentary, especially ethnographic, uninterrupted filming of events has kept faith with Bazin’s precept.

COLOUR AND WIDE SCREEN

Whereas the silent film was black-and-white with only a few experiments in colour, by the 1930s the full spectrum was available to the film-maker and economically viable. These days it is very rare for black-and-white to be used. Notable exceptions such as Peter Bogdanovitch’s Last Picture Show (1971) and Woody Allen’s Manhattan (1979) have resurrected the glories of black-and-white. For a long time, however, people such as Bergman and Kurosawa preferred monochrome photography and only commercial pressures finally made the possibility of choice a faint one. However, now that colour stock is proving unstable a revival of black-and-white is likely.

Colour holds particular dangers for the film-maker, which can become all too apparent in the editing room. The temptation to be merely colourful leads to cluttered art direction and less discipline with regard to composition and choice of shot. For Luchino Visconti in Say Death in Venice (1970) this led to a shooting style which made every shot a tour de force but seems to have created problems in sequencing. On many occasions the cut was an interruption rather than an aid to providing the necessary flow. In the right hands, consciousness of the advantages of black-and-white can lead to an interesting marriage. This was true in Michael Powell’s A Matter of Life and Death (1946) where the scenes in 'heaven' were rendered in black-and-white while those on earth were shot in colour. In both contexts the art direction was carefully controlled to support this choice.

Wide screen had also been experimented with in the silent era. Abel Gance’s Napoleon (1925) employed an incredible technique which sometimes appeared on the screen as a triptych. Commercially it was the advent of Cinemascope in 1953 with The Robe that made alternative aspect ratios a reality. The effect of wide screen on cutting technique is well analysed by Millar in The Technique of Film Editing. In the hands of a master such as Elia Kazan – Wild River (1960), East of Eden (1955), The Arrangement (1969), etc. – it is a revelation, but for many the effect on composition and the control of movement within the frame is all too intimidating. For wide screen can exacerbate the need for consciousness of the focus of interest in the frame. In continuity cutting the junction between two images should take advantage of the audience’s expectation of both the relations of the new shot to the preceding one, and more importantly the area of the frame that is to be concentrated on. If, for instance, the cut is taking advantage of a movement that is continued across the cut it is ineffective to show a medium shot of someone walking which cuts to a wide high angle where the person is an insignificant detail in the top right hand corner. By the time the audience ‘finds’ the focus of interest the value of movement as a bridging device is lost. It is interesting that both Eisenstein’s mise-en-shot principle and Bazin’s preference for continuous action can both be adhered to more easily in wide screen.

TECHNIQUE AND MANIPULATION

In recent years it has become common to hear two opposed views about the best use of editing. On the one hand, it is maintained that the best cutting is invisible, that a seamless smooth construction or a denial of the art by making it invisible should be the aim. On the other, it is suggested that all editing technique should be apparent, that if you are manipulating reality it is more honest to show that you are doing so. The two schools of thought might be assumed to apply to fiction and documentary respectively, but this is not so. Dramatic film often makes good use of allowing the audience to become aware of editing techniques. For instance, both Godard and Rohmer in different ways resist the audience’s expectations of a cut. Conversely, many a documentary depends for its credibility on seamless construction.

Attitudes to editing must never be reduced to the opportunist or merely imitative. This chapter has only allowed the barest hint at the complexity of the historical development of the craft, but should prevent the beginner from an approach to editing that ignores the perspective of the past, and should allow you to approach the practical aspects with a due sense of humility and awareness. No cut is made in isolation from the development of cinema thus far, and you ignore at your peril the questions raised by each major contributor to film. The techniques employed by a number of contemporary directors are analysed in Chapter 5.