EDITING: PUDOVKIN’S FIVE EDITING TECHNIQUES

A Little Theory
Editing is the construction of scenes through the assembly of shots. In the 1920s when the great Russian theorists scoped out what the new elastic medium could do, they focused on the storytelling potential of editing.

Five Editing Principles
In the 1920s Vsevolod Pudovkin set down five editing techniques that remain the foundation of modern day cutting. He named them as follows:

1. Contrast
2. Parallelism
3. Symbolism
4. Simultaneity
5. Leitmotif

For Pudovkin the purposeful use of editing could guide the audience’s emotional response. Therefore he believed it was the job of both the writer and editor to master editing as their single most important job was the “psychological guidance” of the spectator.” (Pudovkin 125)

Pudovkin’s five principles show how editing choices can evoke specific audience emotions. As effective then as they are now, Pudovkin’s principles are reproduced here as they appeared in Film Theory and Criticism, 4th edition (edited by Mast et al.). Pudovkin first published his editing principles in his native Russian in 1926. Numbering was added for clarity.

Here’s how Pudovkin explained his editing principles almost 100 years ago.

On Editing
—V. Pudovkin 1926

1. Contrast — Suppose it be our task to tell of the miserable situation of a starving man; the story will impress the more vividly if associated with mention of the senseless gluttony of a well-to-do man.

On just such a simple contrast relation is based the corresponding editing method. On the screen the impression of this contrast is yet increased, for it is possible not only to relate the starving sequence to the gluttony sequence, but also to relate separate scenes and even separate shots of scenes to one another, thus, as it were, forcing the spectator to compare the two actions all the time, one strengthening the other. The editing of contrast is one of the most effective, but also one of the commonest and most standardized, of methods, and so care should be taken not to overdo it.

2. Parallelism — This method resembles contrast, but is considerably wider. Its substance can be explained more clearly by an example. In a scenario as yet unproduced a section occurs as follows: a working man, one of the leaders of a strike, is condemned to death; the execution is fixed for 5 a.m. The sequence is edited thus: a factory-owner, employer of the condemned man, is leaving a restaurant drunk, he looks at his wrist-watch: 4 o’clock. The accused is shown — he is being made ready to be led out. Again the manufacturer, he rings a door-bell to ask the time: 4:30. The prison wagon drives along the street under heavy guard. The maid who opens the door — the wife of the condemned — is subjected to a sudden senseless assault. The drunken factory-owner snores on a bed, his leg with trouser-end upturned, his hand hanging down with wrist-watch visible, the hands of the watch crawl slowly to 5 o’clock. The workman is being hanged. In this instance two thematically unconnected incidents develop in parallel by means of the watch that tells of the approaching execution. The watch on the wrist of the callous brute, as it were connects hi
with the chief protagonist of the approaching tragic denouement, thus ever present in the consciousness of the spectator. This is undoubtedly an interesting method, capable of considerable development.

3. Symbolism — In the final scenes of the film Strike the shooting down of workmen is punctuated by shots of the slaughter of a bull in the stockyard. The scenarist, as it were, desires to say: just as a butcher fells a bull with the swing of a pole-axe, so cruelly and in cold blood, were shot down the workers. This method is especially interesting because, by means of editing, it introduces an abstract concept into the consciousness of the spectator without use of a title.

4. Simultaneity — In American films the final section is constructed from the simultaneous rapid development of two actions, in which the outcome of one depends on the outcome of the other. The end of the present-day section of Intolerance... is thus constructed. The whole aim of this method is to create in the spectator a maximum tension of excitement by the constant forcing of a question, such as, in this case: Will they be in time? — will they be in time?

The method is a purely emotional one, and nowadays overdone almost to the point of boredom, but it cannot be denied that of all the methods of constructing the end hitherto devised it is the most effective.

5. Leit-motif (reiteration of theme) — Often it is interesting for the scenarist especially to emphasise the basic theme of the scenario. For this purpose exists the method of reiteration. Its nature can easily be demonstrated by an example. In an anti-religious scenario that aimed at exposing the cruelty and hypocrisy of the Church in employ of the Tsarist regime, the same shot was several times repeated: a church-bell slowly ringing and, superimposed on it, the title: "The sound of bells sends into the world a message of patience and love." This piece appeared whenever the scenarist desired to emphasise the stupidity of patience, or the hypocrisy of the love thus preached.

—1926 (Pudovkin 125-6)

Further Reading

Editing: Additional Techniques
By the end of the 1920s the basics of scene construction had been laid down. Pudovkin along with Sergei Eisenstein, D.W. Griffith, and Fritz Lang had so successfully advanced the craft that much of what followed were variations of their basic techniques.

In the same way that modern day editing is a footnote to these early pioneers, many of their inventions have been attributed to 19th century novelists. Eisenstein, for example, credited much of Griffith’s early innovations like progressive montage, intercutting, the close-up and even the dissolve to the novels of Charles Dickens (Eisenstein 398). What these early theorists did was create film equivalents for proven literary forms while, at the same time, mining the new medium for yet undiscovered techniques.

Here is a representative selection of the staple editing techniques used by contemporary filmmakers.

Film Elements
17. Montage Citizen Kane
18. Montage Psycho
19. Assembly Psycho
20. Mise-en-scène Psycho
21. Intercutting Cabaret
22. Split Screen Kill Bill Vol. 1
23. Dissolves Citizen Kane
24. Dissolves Barton Fink
25. Smash Cut American Beauty

PUDOVKIN’S FIVE EDITING TECHNIQUES
Film Element: Montage

A montage is created through an assembly of quick cuts, disconnected in time or place, that combine to form a larger idea. A montage is frequently used to convey passage of time, coming of age, or emotional transition.

Originally “montage,” which is a French term meaning “to assemble,” referred to the creative construction of scenes from the “assembly of shots.” Today it means a specific narrative construction — a series of shots usually without dialog.

Film Example: Citizen Kane

There are a number of superb montages in Citizen Kane. Interestingly, almost identically constructed montages are used to depict Kane’s disintegrating relationship with both his first and second wife. Each montage takes place in a single setting, each shows the couple engaged in a single activity. The first shows the couple at the breakfast table. The second is set in a huge great room. Both montages return us to the same location and the same activity. There are no cutaways to other locations or characters. In this way the audience can focus on the changing behavior of the couple as the location and activity are unchanged. By showing the disintegration with a mirrored form, the montage is able to suggest a certain inevitability with respect to Kane’s ability to hold onto relationships. It’s as though the wives change, but the pattern of disintegration is constant. Here’s a look at the second montage featuring Susan, Kane’s second wife.

Susan’s Montage

As we go into the montage, Kane and Susan are seen arguing as Susan works on a puzzle. When we come out of the montage, years later, the couple is still arguing and Susan is still working on a puzzle. In a brief two minutes of screen time, we get a sense of their prolonged unhappiness and its escalation over time.

The script uses the progression of puzzle-making to indicate the passage of time. The choice of puzzle-making as an activity also cleverly reminds us that Kane is as much an enigma to Susan as he is to the journalists. It’s as though Kane himself is like an unending series of puzzles; as soon as one is done, another presents itself.

Dramatic Value

Here the montage suggests passage of time and character progression. By using the same construction twice, it allows the audience to make comparisons and, from that, new inferences.
Citizen Kane (1941)

Screenplay: Herman J. Mankiewicz and Orson Welles.

INT. THE GRAND HALL IN XANADU - 1925

Closeup of an enormous jigsaw puzzle. A hand is putting in the last piece. Camera moves back to reveal jigsaw puzzle spread out on the floor.

Susan is on the floor before her jigsaw puzzle. Kane is in an easy chair. Behind them towers the massive Renaissance fireplace. It is light and Baroque candelabra illuminates the scene.

(We are dropping in at the end of the scene)

SUSAN
If I promise to be a good girl!
Not to drink - and to entertain
all the governors and the senators
with dignity -
(she puts a slur into the word)
Charlie -

There is still no answer.

DISSOLVE OUT:

DISSOLVE IN:

Another picture puzzle - Susan’s hands fitting in a missing piece.

DISSOLVE:

Another picture puzzle - Susan’s hands fitting in a missing piece.

DISSOLVE:

INT. XANADU - LIVING ROOM - DAY - 1928

Another picture puzzle.

Camera pulls back to show Kane and Susan in much the same positions as before, except that they are older.
18. Film Element: Montage

Character-driven movies often fail to enlist cinematic tools defaulting to dialog instead. The scripts appear more like “radio plays” or what Hitchcock has called “talking photographs.” But there are many character-driven films like The Piano, American Beauty, and Time of the Gypsies that succeed beautifully. These films, like Charlie Kaufman’s Adaptation, use the full complement of cinematic tools available. In the following example we see a dazzling montage take us inside the head of protagonist Charlie Kaufman, in Kaufman’s fictionalized autobiography of his life as an L.A. screenwriter.

Film Example: Adaptation

Charlie Kaufman’s Adaptation opens on a black screen with a voiceover monologue, cuts to a scene establishing the character, and then returns to voice over which poses the questions “Why I am I here? How did I get here?” The question is met with a sweeping cinematic montage that immediately sets up tone and conflict. The montage takes us through the great evolutionary achievements of nature and of man. Finally we arrive at the last stage of evolutionary progression — Charlie Kaufman dining in an L.A. restaurant.

Dramatic Value

The montage gives the film a spectacular visual complement to the intelligence of the opening voice over and the introductory scene. It depicts the scope of the protagonist’s historical and philosophical continuum and the impossible standard against which he will evaluate the meaning of his life. Right off the bat, we are given a clear picture of just how high the cards are stacked against the protagonist finding the answers he needs.

Script Note

The script excerpt is taken from a November 21, 2000 draft. In this draft the montage appears in Act Two, much later in the film.

Other Films

Apocalypse Now (opening thematic montage)
Falling Down (opening thematic montage)
Adaptation (2002) (Page 41, Scene 62)
Adapted from the book, The Orchard Thief by Susan Orlean.

MONTAGE

This sequence shows the entire history of mankind from a world sparsely populated with primitive hunter-gathers to today’s overcrowded technological society. We see the history of architecture, war, religion, commerce. We see murder and procreation. We see man interacting with his environment: farming, eating meat, admiring a view. We see old age and birth. We see it again and again at dizzying speed. We see Laroche as a child alone with his turtles. We see Orlean as a child alone with her diary. We see Alice serving food, smiling at customers. We finish on sad Kaufman getting into his car and leaving the Santa Barbara Orchid Show. The entire sequence takes two minutes.
19. Film Element: Assembly Editing

Assembly editing is a term that Alfred Hitchcock used in referring to the kind of editing used in Psycho's shower scene. In this case, assembly means the creative construction of a scene through the assembly of separate pieces of film. The resulting scene being a kind of mosaic of shots producing a larger idea.

Film Example: Psycho

Cutting, as Hitchcock said in his 1959 televised interview for the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, is a kind of severance (Hitchcock). It is also a kind of assembly.

In Psycho, Hitchcock intentionally differentiates the film's two murders by editing choices.

Shower Scene
In the shower scene, Hitchcock's purpose is to first shock us with the event of a murder and then horrify us with its brutality. In a rapid succession of cuts, 78 in 45 seconds, Hitchcock takes us past the shower curtain into the stall giving us the POV of the murderer. It's almost as though Hitchcock's exaggerated use of cutting intentionally refers back to the cutting of the victim.

Stairwell Scene
The second murder is shot and edited entirely differently. The focus is not on the brutality of the murderer, as we have already seen that. The focus is on whether or not the victim will be killed. Consequently, it's a suspense scene with our attention directed on the minutes preceding the murder, not the murder.

In the second murder, the shots are long takes. Once the audience and the victim realize that the victim is about to be killed, the scene is over. Despite the fact that the methods of both murders were identical, the editing generates two entirely different emotional responses.

Dramatic Value
Editing can guide the emotional response of the viewer by choosing how to parcel out the event in shots over time.

Script Note
The script excerpt from the "shower scene" is included to show how highly stylized editing can be suggested without disrupting the mounting suspense.

Other Films
Metropolis (dream sequence)
Psycho (1960) (Shower Scene)


INT. MARY IN SHOWER

Over the bar on which hangs the shower curtain, we can see the bathroom door, not entirely closed. For a moment we watch Mary as she washes and soaps herself.

There is still a small worry in her eyes, but generally she looks somewhat relieved.

Now we see the bathroom door being pushed slowly open.

The noise of the shower drowns out any sound. The door is then slowly and carefully closed.

And we see the shadow of a woman fall across the shower curtain. Mary's back is turned to the curtain. The white brightness of the bathroom is almost blinding.

Suddenly we see the hand reach up, grasp the shower curtain, rip it aside.

CUT TO:

MARY - ECU

As she turns in response to the feel and SOUND of the shower curtain being torn aside. A look of pure horror erupts in her face. A low terrible groan begins to rise up out of her throat. A hand comes into the shot. The hand holds an enormous bread knife. The flint of the blade shatters the screen to an almost total, silver blankness.

THE SLASHING

An impression of a knife slashing, as if tearing at the very screen, ripping the film. Over it the brief gulps of screaming. And then silence. And then the dreadful thump as Mary's body falls in the tub.

REVERSE ANGLE

The blank whiteness, the blur of the shower water, the hand pulling the shower curtain back. We catch one flicker of a glimpse of the murderer.

A woman, her face contorted with madness, her head wild with hair, as if she were wearing a fright-wig. And then we see only the curtain, closed across the tub, and hear the rush of the shower water. Above the shower-bar we see the bathroom door open again and after a moment we HEAR the SOUND of the front door slamming.

CUT TO:

THE DEAD BODY

Lying half in, half out of the tub, the head tumbled over, touching the floor, the hair wet, one eye wide open as if popped, one arm lying limp and wet along the tile floor. Coming down the side of the tub, running thick and dark along the porcelain, we see many small threads of blood.

CAMERA FOLLOWS away from the body, travels slowly across the bathroom, past the toilet, out into the bedroom. As CAMERA approaches the bed, we see the folded newspaper as Mary placed it on the bedside table.
20. Film Element: **Mise-en-Scène**

*Mise-en-scène* is a French term meaning “putting in the scene,” originally used to describe the physical production of the film. Today, however, mise-en-scène refers to a scene in which the action plays out in front of a continuously running camera. New compositions are created through blocking, lens zooms and camera movement instead of cutting. The scene is shot in real time as one uninterrupted take that will stand on its own without the aid of editing.

**Film Example: Psycho (Shower Scene Aftermath)**

Right after Psycho’s shower scene, the cutting changes to mise-en-scène. Now we see Norman rushing from his mother’s house to the cabin where Marion was killed. Once inside, the camera moves with Norman as he paces back and forth thinking about what to do with the body. When Norman enters another cabin to retrieve janitorial supplies, the camera continues to roll outside the door, until he returns with a mop and a bucket. When Norman re-enters the cabin we watch in real time as Norman drags the body onto the plastic sheeting. This is followed by Norman mopping out the tub and finally driving off with the body. Hitchcock’s switch to mise-en-scène achieves a number of things.

**Dramatic Value**

Where the rapid assembly editing of the shower scene appeared constructed to add chaos and disorient, the mise-en-scène shots in the aftermath scene appear to return us to normalcy. The shots are long, smooth takes that spool out slowly in real time. However, the content sabotages any sense of relief. Seeing Norman carefully smooth out the plastic sheeting readying it for Marion’s body, then sloshing her blood around the tub with a janitor’s mop only serves to sustain our revulsion. We are supposed to feel soothed by the return to normalcy, but instead it heightens our fears.

**Script Note**

Take a look at how effortlessly the script exploits editing technique but does not call attention to technical details.

**Other Films Using Mise-en-Scène Shots**

*Rope* (entire film)

*Touch of Evil* (opening)

*The Player* (opening)

*The 400 Blows* (many shots throughout)

**Historical Note**

Hitchcock filmed *Rope* (1948) as one continuous mise-en-scène shot. The only breaks in filming occurred when he stopped for necessary magazine changes.
Psycho (1960) (Shower Scene Aftermath)


EXT. THE PATH - (NIGHT)
Norman is coming AT CAMERA, running head-on. He dashes into an extreme close up and we see the terror and fear ripe in his face. CAMERA PANS as Norman races past, holds as Norman runs to the porch and quickly along it and directly to Mary's room.

(Later in the interior scene)

INT. MARY'S CABIN - (NIGHT)
Norman pauses a moment in the doorway, glances about the room, hears ...CAMERA PANS down and we see him spread the shower curtain on the bedroom floor, just outside the bathroom door. He spreads the curtain so that one end of it comes up against the bathroom threshold and slightly over and onto the tile floor. Again he goes into the bathroom and CAMERA TILTS up so that we see only the upper half of Norman. He works carefully, with his arms extended away from his body, slowly pulls the dead body out of the tub, drags it across the tile floor and onto the spread-out shower curtain in the bedroom.
### 21. Film Element: Intercutting

**Intercutting** (also called cross-cutting) occurs when two scenes are shot in sequence, but presented by cutting back and forth between them. This creates a sense of two actions occurring simultaneously in two different locations. Frequently intercutting is used leading up to the climax scene in Act Three. Intercutting can also be used for other purposes. In *Cabaret*, winner of eight Academy Awards, intercutting is used at the end of Act Two to suggest change: in this case that of political climate. This is a tough abstract concept to convey without dialog. Here’s how it was done in *Cabaret*.

**Film Example: Cabaret**

Set in Berlin during Hitler’s rise, we first see the freewheeling world of the Berlin cabaret. As the film progresses, the Nazi’s presence strengthens until finally, it has taken over the culture. The change of political climate is suggested in a dance number that adds intercutting to the end of the scene to make the inferences less abstract and more particular.

**Part 1**
The dance number starts like ones earlier in the movie. A kick-line of dancers perform, while the MC throws out sexual innuendoes to his audience. Then the change begins.

**Part 2**
The dancers stop. Each tears off the flowers pinned to their hats. They spin their hats around. The hats change from flirtatious to militaristic. Their dance steps change from chorus line kicks to the goose-stepping march of the Nazis. The orange yellow saturated lighting associated with the era’s expressionism and freedom drains away. It’s replaced by a chilling blue fog. Then the film begins to intercut.

**Part 3**
It cuts from the goose-stepping dancers to the home of a young Jewish woman. Each cut back to the woman’s house steps up the brutality of the lawless thugs that have trespassed onto her property. First we see the thugs rush onto her gated property. Next, the woman stands bewildered at her doorway responding to late night callers who have disappeared. Lastly, we see her family dog lying dead on her doorstep. The brutal murder of her dog, grounds the abstract dance with a specific incident.

**Dramatic Value**
The intercutting goes from the abstract to the specific. It immediately sets up the idea that the old world is gone, and a new one has arrived. The violence of the Nazi thugs has become the norm and will go without punishment.

**Script Note**
The two scenes excerpted here were combined into one scene in the final film.

**Other Films**
*Pulp Fiction, The Graduate, Thelma and Louise*
INT. KIT KLUB - NIGHT (Page 21-2)
CRASHINGLY LOUD BAVARIAN MUSIC - SHOW LIGHTS FULL UP
- KLUB AUDIENCE WILDLY ENTHUSIASTIC.
The MC, still in cabaret make-up, but now wearing shirt and lederhosen, is performing a traditional Bavarian Slapdance... upon an unidentifiable GIRL PARTNER; he smilingly administers face and body slaps in time to the music. The comic violence of this dance should play in juxtaposition to the inter-cut scenes of realistic violence. Music cuts off on each quick cut to the mugging.
QUICK CUT TO:
MAX, being knocked to the ground, bloody, but silent still, as the Nazis begin to kick him brutally.
QUICK CUT TO:
Shot of MC's feet in sturdy Bavarian boots as his feet continue the rhythm of the slapdance.
QUICK CUT TO:
Shot of NAZI's feet, kicking MAX.
QUICK CUT TO:
Smiling MC, dancing, slapping, stomping.
QUICK CUT TO:
On the music's last beat, the YOUNG NAZI aims one final kick at MAX, who rolls over in silent anguish.
INT. KIT KAT CLUB - NIGHT (Page 105)
The Kit Kat CHORUS GIRLS (about seven) enter the wings doing a typical "Tiller Girls" routine. Facing front, arms around each other's waists, unison kicking, etc. They are dressed in abbreviated costumes, revealing much flesh above their stocking tops and at the cleavage. Suddenly we are aware that one of the girls is the M.C.
(Note: This will be a version of the very effective number from the show in which the M.C. reveals himself to be a transvestite.)
As the dance begins to fall apart, we hear the ominous sounds of military drums. The music changes to a martial version of "TOMORROW BELONGS TO ME" as the M.C. and the GIRLS goose-step onstage.
**22. Film Element: Split Screen**

A *split screen* runs two shots side-by-side within a single frame. Like intercutting, a split screen creates the idea of simultaneous action. Split screen was a staple of the 1950s and 1960s. It was often used to depict phone conversations as in *Pillow Talk* that starred Rock Hudson and Doris Day. It was also used in classic horror films. Its use, however, is not limited to genre. Recently Quentin Tarantino revived the split screen in his comic book–inspired film *Kill Bill Vol. 1*.

**Film Example: Kill Bill Vol. 1**

Black Mamba (Uma Thurman) lies comatose in a hospital bed. In having unexpectedly survived a brutal attempt on her life, an assassin is sent in to finish the job.

As the assassin, dressed as a nurse, walks toward Thurman's hospital bed, the film switches to split screen. By using split screen we are able to see both Thurman lying unconscious in bed and the approaching assassin at the same time.

**Dramatic Value**

In this instance the split screen also suggests the imminent physical proximity of the victim to the assassin by having the two share the frame. We see what appears to be a lethal hypodermic needle almost touching the arm of the sleeping victim where the assassin intends to empty it. In this way the writer/director Tarantino exploits the elasticity of time and place that the split screen provides and is able to heighten the suspense of the scene.
23. Film Element: Dissolves

Dissolves blend one shot into another. This is achieved optically by fading out the first shot while the second shot fades up. A dissolve softens a cut. Dissolves can be brief or extended depending how “soft” the filmmaker wants the effect to be. Dissolves have been a staple technique since the 1920s.

Film Example: Citizen Kane
In the script of Citizen Kane, Orson Welles and co-writer Herman Mankiewicz use dissolves to convey the idea of enormity. In the opening scene, the camera introduces Kane’s estate, dissolving twelve times. Each dissolve shows us a different part of the estate. This underscores its magnitude. The implication is that no one shot could have encompassed the massive grounds, so multiple shots had to be taken.

Dramatic Value
A dissolves links two ideas together by blending one image into another. In this case multiple views of the estate are presented but remain connected by the use of dissolves. Dissolves offer endless dramatic possibilities. They are often used to show the passage of time.

Script Note
Although twelve dissolves were used in the script’s introductory montage, due to space, only two of the twelve are included here.

Other Films
- Metropolis (transformation of the heroine into an evil robot)
- Barton Fink (arriving at the Hotel Earle, waves)
Citizen Kane (1941) (Page 1)
Screenplay: Herman J. Mankiewicz and Orson Welles.

EXT. XANADU - FAINT DAWN - 1940 (MINIATURE)
Window, very small in the distance, illuminated.
All around this is an almost totally black screen. Now, as the camera
moves slowly towards the window which is almost a postage stamp in the
frame, other forms appear; barbed wire, cyclone fencing, and now, looming
up against an early morning sky, enormous iron grille work.
Camera travels up what is now shown to be a gateway of gigantic
proportions and holds on the top of it - a huge initial "K" showing
darker and darker against the dawn sky. Through this and beyond we see
the fairy-tale mountaintop of Xanadu, the great castle a silhouette at
its summit, the little window a distant accent in the darkness.

DISSOLVE:

(A SERIES OF SET-UPS, EACH CLOSER TO THE GREAT WINDOW, ALL TELLING
SOMETHING OF:)
The literally incredible domain of CHARLES FOSTER KANE.
Its right flank resting for nearly forty miles on the Gulf Coast, it truly
extends in all directions farther than the eye can see. Designed by
nature to be almost completely bare and flat - it was, as will develop,
practically all marshland when Kane acquired and changed its face - it
is now pleasantly uneven, with its fair share of rolling hills and one
very good-sized mountain, all man-made. Almost all the land is improved,
either through cultivation for farming purposes or through careful
landscaping, in the shape of parks and lakes. The castle dominates
itself, an enormous pile, compounded of several genuine castles, of
European origin, of varying architecture - dominates the scene, from the
very peak of the mountain.

DISSOLVE:

GOLF LINKS (MINIATURE)
Past which we move. The greens are straggly and overgrown, the fairways
wild with tropical weeds, the links unused and not seriously tended for a
long time.

DISSOLVE OUT:
Film Element: Dissolves

As we discussed in the previous example, dissolves are created optically by blending two shots together by fading out the first, as the second shot fades up.

Film Example: *Barton Fink*

*Barton Fink* opens with the success of Barton’s Broadway play. In the afterglow of his success we see Barton in a heated exchange with his agent who urges Barton to go to California and “cash in” on his fame. Barton adamantly refuses not wanting to leave New York or the common man, which are the wellsprings of his creativity.

First Shot

The dissolve reveals the outcome of their argument: an iconic image of waves crashing in the sunlit Pacific Ocean. Clearly the agent has won. Then we see an extended dissolve blending the ocean imagery with an unexpected location: the creepy foyer of the Hotel Earle.

Second Shot

The second image is anything but Hollywood. As the slow dissolve plays out, the floor of the hotel seems washed with the ocean. Then the ocean imagery dissolves away and Barton is left alone. It’s as though Barton has been ejected from the ocean into the worn foyer — a fish-out-of-water. The dissolve works contrast the iconic image of California against the new reality in which Barton has found himself. It also serves to underscore Barton’s status as an outsider.

Dramatic Value

Endless dramatic possibilities. Often used in montages to indicate the passage of time. Dissolves also soften the cuts between images.

Other Films

*Titanic* (see Film Element 50)

*Apocalypse Now* (introduction of protagonist)

*Adaptation* (opening montage)
The purpose of a smash cut is to jar the audience with a sudden and unexpected change in image or sound. Here are two film examples of how a smash cut was created — there are many more methods used and many more yet to be invented.

Film Example: American Beauty
In American Beauty, the writer, Alan Ball, employs both visual and audio smash cuts to introduce protagonist Lester Burnham fast asleep in his suburban cocoon. Although the visuals suggested by the writer were greatly pared down by director Sam Mendes, the overall story elements were left in place.

The smash cut is created visually by going from an aerial wide shot to a close up of a clock. It was augmented aurally by going from silence to the blast of an alarm clock.

Film Example: Psycho
A smash cut can also be produced by cutting a wide shot against a huge close-up. The effect is like a loud visual bang. It jolts the audience by sabotaging their visual expectations. This was done in the stairway scene in Psycho. In this case it was also a high-angle.

Note: Another method is to splice a fast moving shot against a static shot. The audience feels like they are on a speeding train that just hit a cement wall.

Script Note
Writers will sometimes specifically spell out their intentions by using “smash cut to” between the two images or scenes. However, oftentimes, the writer will just juxtapose the two images without cueing the reader.

Dramatic Value
Like many other techniques, a smash cut underscores a scene. However, its purpose is to create a jarring, uncomfortable sensation for the audience. Used sparingly, it can be effective. If, however, the audience learns to expect it, it will feel hackneyed.