

SECOND EDITION

THE TECHNIQUE OF FILM EDITING

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ENHANCED REISSUE OF A CLASSIC TEXT



Chapter 1

Editing and the Silent Film

“ONCE more I repeat, that editing is the creative force of filmic reality, and that nature provides only the raw material with which it works. That, precisely, is the relationship between editing and the film.”¹ This confident statement, from the pen of one of the silent cinema’s most noted directors, was written in 1928. By examining the films produced in the first thirty years of the cinema’s history and by drawing on his own extensive experience as a practising director, Pudovkin came to the conclusion that the process of editing—the selection, timing and arrangement of given shots into a film continuity—was the crucial creative act in the production of a film. It would be difficult to-day to be so emphatic. Contemporary film-makers have raised other elements of film production—most notably acting and dialogue writing—to a level of importance which is incompatible with Pudovkin’s statement. The tradition of expressive visual juxtaposition, which is characteristic of the best silent films, has been largely neglected since the advent of sound. It will be one of the main arguments of this book that this neglect has brought with it a great loss to the cinema.

Meanwhile, the history of the silent cinema provides ample corroboration for Pudovkin’s belief. The growth in the expressiveness of the film medium from the simple film records of the Lumière brothers to the sophisticated continuities of the late twenties was the result of a corresponding development in editing technique. Pudovkin, in 1928, was able to convey infinitely more complex ideas and emotions in his films than were the Lumière brothers thirty years earlier, precisely because he had learnt to use editing methods through which to do so.

The history of the silent cinema is by now so well documented that there is no need to restate the precise historical events in this evolution: when a particular editing device was first used, or who should be given credit for its first application, are questions for the film historian. What concerns us is the significance of new editing constructions, the cause of their development and their relevance to contemporary usage. The brief historical notes that follow are designed not so much to summarise the research of historians as to provide a logical starting point for a study of the art of film editing.

¹ *Film Technique* by V. I. Pudovkin. *Newnes*, 1929, p. xvi.

The Beginnings of Film Continuity

In making their earliest films, the Lumière brothers adopted a simple procedure: they chose a subject which they thought might be interesting to record, set up their camera in front of it, and went on shooting until the stock ran out. Any common event—*Baby at the Lunch Table*, *A Boat Leaving Harbour*—served their purpose, which was simply to record events in motion. They used the film camera as a recording instrument whose sole advantage over the still camera was that it could capture the element of movement: indeed, the essence of a film like *A Boat Leaving Harbour* could have been equally conveyed in a still photograph.

Although most of the Lumière films were records of simple unrehearsed events, one of the earliest already shows a conscious control of the material being shot. In *Watering the Gardener* the Lumières recorded for the first time a prearranged comic scene in which they exercised conscious control over their material: a small boy steps on the hose with which a gardener is watering his flowers; the gardener is puzzled when the flow stops, looks at the nozzle; the boy takes his foot off the hose and the gardener is drenched with water. The action itself, as well as the fact that it moved, was designed to capture the spectator's interest.

The films of George Méliès are to-day mainly remembered for the ingenuity of their trick-work and for their primitive charm. At the time of production, however, they marked an important advance on previous work in that they enlarged the scope of film story-telling beyond the single shot. *Cinderella* (1899), Méliès' second long film, ran 410 feet (where the Lumière films had been around 50 feet) and told its story in twenty motion tableaux: (1) Cinderella in Her Kitchen; (2) The Fairy, Mice and Lackeys; (3) The Transformation of the Rat; . . . (20) The Triumph of Cinderella.² Each *tableau* was similar in kind to the Lumières' *Watering the Gardener* in that a relatively simple incident was prearranged and then recorded onto a single continuous strip of film. But whereas the Lumières had confined themselves to recording short single-incident events, Méliès here attempted to tell a story of several episodes. The continuity of *Cinderella* established a connection between separate shots. The twenty *tableaux*—presented rather like a series of lecture-slides—acquired an elementary kind of unity by virtue of revolving around a central character: seen together, they told a story of greater complexity than was possible in the single shot film.

The limitations of *Cinderella*, as of most of Méliès' subsequent films, are the limitations of theatrical presentation: each incident—like each act in a play—is set against a single background and is self-contained in time and place; scenes are never started in one place and continued in another; the camera, always stationed at a distance from the actors and facing the backcloth head-on, remains stationary and outside the scene of the action—precisely as does the spectator in the theatre auditorium. Further, the continuity of *Cinderella* is purely one of subject: there is no continuity of action from shot to shot and the time relationship between consecutive shots is left undefined.

While Méliès continued for many years to produce increasingly sophisticated films on the theatrical pattern of *Cinderella*, some of his contemporaries were beginning to work on entirely different lines. In 1902, the American Edwin S. Porter, one of Edison's first cameramen, made *The Life of an American Fireman*. His very approach to the task of making a film contrasts sharply with hitherto accepted practice:

Porter rummaged through the stock of Edison's old films, searching for suitable scenes around which to build a story. He found quantities of pictures of fire department activities. Since fire departments had such a strong popular appeal,

²An Index to the Creative Work of Georges Méliès, by Georges Sadoul. *The British Film Institute*, 1947.

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with their colour and action, Porter chose them as his subject. But he still needed some central idea or incident by which to organise the scenes of the fire department in action. . . . Porter therefore concocted a scheme that was as startling as it was different: a mother and child were to be caught in a burning building and rescued at the last moment by the fire department.³

Porter's decision to construct a story film from previously shot material was unprecedented. It implied that the meaning of a shot was not necessarily self-contained but could be modified by joining the shot to others. A description of the last episode of *The Life of an American Fireman* will suffice to give an idea of the film's revolutionary method of construction.

Scene 7. Arrival at the Fire

In this wonderful scene we show the entire fire department . . . arriving at the scene of action. An actual burning building is in the centre foreground. On the right background the fire department is seen coming at great speed. Upon the arrival of the different apparatus, the engines are ordered to their places, hose is quickly run out from the carriages, ladders are adjusted to the windows and streams of water are poured into the burning structure. At this crucial moment comes the great climax of the series.

We dissolve to the interior of the building and show a bedchamber with a woman and child enveloped in flame and suffocating smoke. The woman rushes back and forth in the room endeavouring to escape, and in her desperation throws open the window and appeals to the crowd below. She is finally overcome by the smoke and falls upon the bed. At this moment the door is smashed in by an axe in the hands of a powerful fire hero. Rushing into the room, he tears the burning draperies from the window and smashes out the entire window frame, ordering his comrades to run up a ladder. Immediately the ladder appears, he seizes the prostrate form of the woman and throws it over his shoulders as if it were an infant, and quickly descends to the ground.

We now dissolve to the exterior of the burning building. The frantic mother having returned to consciousness, and clad only in her night clothes, is kneeling on the ground imploring the fireman to return for her child. Volunteers are called for and the same fireman who rescued the mother quickly steps out and offers to return for the babe. He is given permission to once more enter the doomed building and without hesitation rushes up the ladder, enters the window and after a breathless wait, in which it appears he must have been overcome with smoke, he appears with the child in his arms and returns safely to the ground. The child, being released and upon seeing its mother, rushes to her and is clasped in her arms, thus making a most realistic and touching ending of the series.⁴

The events which form the climax of *The Life of an American Fireman* are rendered in three stages. A dramatic problem is set in the first shot which is not resolved till the end of the third. The action is carried over from shot to shot and an illusion of continuous development is created. Instead of splitting the action into three self-contained sections joined by titles—which is how Méliès might have tackled the situation—Porter simply joined the shots together. As a result, the spectator felt that he was witnessing a single continuous event.

By constructing his film in this way, Porter was able to present a long, physically complicated incident without resorting to the jerky, one-point-at-a-time continuity of a Méliès film. But the gain derived from the new method is more than a gain in fluency. For one thing it gives the director an almost limitless freedom of movement since he can split up the action into small, manageable units. In the climax of *The Life of an*

³The Rise of the American Film by Lewis Jacobs. Harcourt, Brace and Co., New York, 1939, p. 37.

⁴The Rise of the American Film by Lewis Jacobs. Harcourt, Brace and Co., New York, 1939, p. 40. Quoted from the Edison catalogue of 1903.

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American Fireman, Porter combined the two hitherto separate styles of film-making: he joined an actuality shot to a staged studio shot without apparently breaking the thread of the action.

Another equally fundamental advantage of Porter's method of assembly is that the director is able to convey a sense of time to the spectator. *The Life of an American Fireman* opens with a shot of a fireman asleep in his chair, dreaming of a woman and child trapped in a burning house (the dream is shown in a "dream balloon"). The next shot shows the fire alarm being raised and is followed by four shots of the firemen hurrying towards the scene of the disaster. These, in turn, are followed by the climax which we have already quoted. An operation taking a considerable length of time is compressed into the space of a one-reeler without, apparently, any discontinuity in the narrative: only the significant parts of the story are selected and joined to form an acceptable, logically developing continuity. Porter had demonstrated that the single shot, recording an incomplete piece of action, is the unit of which films must be constructed and thereby established the basic principle of editing.

Porter's next important film, *The Great Train Robbery* (1903), shows a more confident use of the newly discovered editing principle. It contains, moreover, one shot transition which is more sophisticated than anything in his earlier film.

Scene 9. A Beautiful Scene in the Valley

The bandits come down the side of the hill, across a narrow stream, mount their horses, and make for the wilderness.

Scene 10. Interior of Telegraph Office

The operator lies bound and gagged on the floor. After struggling to his feet, he leans on the table and telegraphs for assistance by manipulating the key with his chin, and then faints from exhaustion. His little daughter enters with his dinner pail. She cuts the rope, throws a glass of water in his face and restores him to consciousness, and, recalling his thrilling experience, he rushes out to give the alarm.

Scene 11. Interior of a Typical Western Dance Hall

Shows a number of men and women in a lively quadrille. A "tenderfoot" is quickly spotted and pushed to the centre of the hall, and compelled to do a jig, while bystanders amuse themselves by shooting dangerously close to his feet. Suddenly the door opens and the half-dead telegraph operator staggers in. The dance breaks up in confusion. The men secure their rifles and hastily leave the room.⁵

The most significant feature of this short excerpt is its freedom of movement. The cut from 9 to 10 takes us from one set of characters to another—from the shot of the escaping bandits, to the office where the operator (whom the bandits gagged in the first scene) lies helpless. There is no direct physical connection between the shots: 10 does not take up the action started in 9. The two events shown in 9 and 10 are happening in parallel and are linked by a continuity of idea.

⁵The Rise of the American Film by Lewis Jacobs. Harcourt, Brace and Co., New York, 1939, p. 45. Quoted from the Edison catalogue of 1904.

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This passage marks a distinct advance on the simple continuity of action of *The Life of an American Fireman*. Porter himself developed this kind of parallel action editing further in his subsequent films, but it was not till Griffith's time that the device found its full application.

Griffith: Dramatic Emphasis

By evolving the simple method of action continuity, Edwin S. Porter showed how a developing story could be presented in terms of the film medium. His control of the presentation was, however, limited. The events of his films were rendered unselectively since each incident was staged at a fixed distance from the camera: there was, as yet, no means by which the director could vary the emphasis of his narrative. Such variations in dramatic intensity as could be achieved had to be conveyed solely through the actors' gestures.

Let us now look at an excerpt from a film made some twelve years after *The Great Train Robbery*—D. W. Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation*. A comparison of the methods of the two films shows the manner in which Porter's simple action continuities were developed by Griffith into a subtle instrument for creating and controlling dramatic tension.

THE BIRTH OF A NATION

Excerpt from Reel 6: *The assassination of Lincoln*

TITLE: "And then, when the terrible days were over and a healing time of peace was at hand" . . . came the fated night of 14th April, 1865.

There follows a short scene in which Benjamin Cameron (Henry B. Walthall) fetches Elsie Stoneman (Lillian Gish) from the Stonemans' house and they leave together for the theatre. They are attending a special gala performance at which President Lincoln is to be present. The performance has already begun.

TITLE:

Time: 8.30

The arrival of the President

		Ft. ⁶
1	<i>FS.</i> ⁷ of Lincoln's party as, one by one, they reach the top of the stairs inside the theatre and turn off towards the President's box. Lincoln's bodyguard comes up first, Lincoln himself last.	7
2	The President's box, viewed from inside the theatre. Members of Lincoln's party appear inside.	4
3	<i>FS.</i> President Lincoln, outside his box, giving up his hat to an attendant.	3
4	The President's box. <i>As in 2.</i> Lincoln appears in the box.	5
5	<i>M.S.</i> Elsie Stoneman and Ben Cameron sitting in the auditorium. They look up towards Lincoln's box, then start clapping and rise from their seats.	7

⁶ The length of each shot is indicated in feet of film.

At silent speed 1 foot is equivalent to a running time of 1 second.

At sound speed 1 foot is equivalent to a running time of $\frac{2}{3}$ second.

⁷ These abbreviations are explained and defined in the *Glossary of Terms*.

6	<i>Shooting</i> from the back of the auditorium towards the stage. The President's box is to the right. The audience, backs to <i>camera</i> , are standing in foreground, clapping and cheering the President.	3
7	The President's box. <i>As in</i> 4. Lincoln and Mrs. Lincoln bow to the audience.	3
8	<i>As in</i> 6.	3
9	The President's box. <i>As in</i> 7. The President bows, then sits down.	5
	<i>TITLE: Mr. Lincoln's personal bodyguard takes his post outside the box.</i>	
10	<i>F.S.</i> The bodyguard coming into the passage outside the box and sitting down. He starts rubbing his knees impatiently.	10
11	<i>Shooting</i> from the back of the auditorium towards the stage. The play is in progress.	5
12	The President's box. <i>As in</i> 9. Lincoln takes his wife's hand. He is watching the play approvingly.	9
13	<i>As in</i> 11. The spectators stop clapping.	4
14	<i>Closer view</i> of the stage. The actors are continuing with the play.	10
	<i>TITLE: To get a view of the play, the bodyguard leaves his post.</i>	
15	<i>F.S.</i> Bodyguard. <i>As in</i> 10. He is clearly impatient.	5
16	<i>Close view</i> of the stage. <i>As in</i> 14.	2
17	<i>F.S.</i> The bodyguard. <i>As in</i> 15. He gets up and puts his chair away behind a side door.	6
18	<i>As in</i> 6. <i>Shooting</i> towards a box near Lincoln's, as the bodyguard enters and takes his place.	3
19	<i>Within a circular mask</i> , we see a <i>closer view</i> of the action of 18. The bodyguard takes his place in the box.	5
	<i>TITLE:</i>	
	<i>Time: 10.30</i>	
	<i>Act III, Scene 2</i>	
20	<i>A general view</i> of the theatre from the back of the auditorium; a <i>diagonal mask</i> leaves only Lincoln's box visible.	5
21	<i>M.S.</i> Elsie and Ben. Elsie points to something in Lincoln's direction.	6
	<i>TITLE: John Wilkes Booth</i>	
22	The head and shoulders of John Wilkes Booth seen <i>within a circular mask</i> .	3
23	<i>As in</i> 21. Elsie is now happily watching the play again.	6
24	Booth. <i>As in</i> 22.	2½
25	<i>Close view</i> of Lincoln's box.	5
26	Booth. <i>As in</i> 22.	4
27	<i>Close view</i> of the stage. <i>As in</i> 14.	4
28	<i>Close view</i> of the box. <i>As in</i> 25. Lincoln smiles approvingly at the play. He makes a gesture with his shoulders as if he were cold and starts to pull his coat on.	8
29	Booth. <i>As in</i> 22. He moves his head up in the act of rising from his seat.	4
30	<i>28 continued.</i> Lincoln finishes putting on his coat.	6
31	The theatre viewed from the back of the auditorium. <i>As in</i> 20. <i>The mask spreads</i> to reveal the whole theatre.	4
32	<i>C.S.</i> The bodyguard, enjoying the play. <i>As in</i> 19, <i>within circular mask</i> .	1½

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33	<i>F.S.</i> Booth. He comes through the door at the end of the passage outside Lincoln's box. He stoops to look through the keyhole into Lincoln's box. He pulls out a revolver and braces himself for the deed.	14
34	<i>C.S.</i> The revolver.	3
35	33 <i>continued.</i> Booth comes up to the door, has momentary difficulty in opening it, then steps into Lincoln's box.	8
36	<i>Close view</i> of Lincoln's box. <i>As in</i> 25. Booth appears behind Lincoln.	5
37	The stage. <i>As in</i> 14. The actors are performing.	4
38	<i>As in</i> 36. Booth shoots Lincoln in the back. Lincoln collapses. Booth climbs on to the side of the box and jumps over on to the stage.	5
39	<i>L.S.</i> Booth on the stage. He throws his arms up and shouts.	
	TITLE: <i>Sic Semper Tyrannis</i>	

The plot of this passage is relatively simple: President Lincoln is assassinated at a theatre while his bodyguard has carelessly left his post. In Porter's time, the events might have been rendered in half a dozen shots and been clear to an audience. Griffith, however, is concerned with more than simply reproducing the plot. He has constructed his scene around four groups of characters: Lincoln's party, including the bodyguard; Elsie Stoneman and Ben Cameron; Booth, the assassin; and the actors on the stage. Each time he cuts from one to another, the transition is acceptable because it has been established that all the characters are present at the scene. Thus although the main action (which concerns Lincoln, the bodyguard and Booth only) is repeatedly interrupted to reveal the surrounding events, there is no apparent discontinuity: Porter's continuity principle is in no way violated.

There is, however, a marked difference between Porter's and Griffith's reasons for splitting the action into short fragments. When Porter cut from one image to another, it was usually because, for physical reasons, it had become impossible to accommodate the events he wanted to show in a single shot. In Griffith's continuity, the action is only rarely carried over from one shot to the next. The viewpoint is changed not for physical but for *dramatic* reasons—to show the spectator a fresh detail of the larger scene which has become most relevant to the drama at the particular moment.

Griffith's approach to editing is thus radically different from Porter's. The excerpt from *The Birth of a Nation* creates its effects through the cumulative impression of a series of details. Griffith has divided the whole action into a number of components and has then re-created the scene from them. The advantage over the earlier editing method is twofold. Firstly, it enables the director to create a sense of depth in his narrative: the various details add up to a fuller, more persuasively life-like picture of a situation than can a single shot, played against a constant background. Secondly, the director is in a far stronger position to guide the spectator's reactions, because he is able to *choose* what particular detail the spectator is to see at any particular moment. A short analysis of the excerpt quoted should amplify the point.

The first fourteen shots establish Lincoln's arrival and reception at the theatre.

Then, a title gives the first hint of the impending danger.

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The following five shots present an interesting comparison with Porter's simple action continuity because they depict a single character's continuous movements.

15 shows the bodyguard waiting impatiently.

Then, instead of showing what he does next, shot 16 establishes the cause of the bodyguard's impatience—the stage which he wishes to see.

17, 18 and 19 show him getting up, moving through the door and settling down in the box. There is a perfectly logical continuity of theme running through the sequence. The cut from 17 to 18 is straightforward: it merely changes the location of the action as the bodyguard moves into the box.

18 and 19, by contrast, are both views of the same action—19 merely draws attention to a detail of the previous larger image. Clearly, this cut is not physically necessary: it is made because it is dramatically effective.

There follows another ominous hint in the title and 20 and 21 reveal the theatre audience, unaware of the danger.

In the shots that follow (22–30), the haunting static image of John Wilkes Booth is cut in after each detail of the general scene, partly to create suspense, partly to establish that Booth is, in fact, unidentified and unsuspected.

Then, after a reminder that the bodyguard is not at his post (32), Booth is seen going into action (33–36).

At this point, instead of showing the assassination, Griffith interrupts the action of 36, which was probably shot as a continuous take with 38, to give a glimpse of the stage (37). The last two cuts form a concise illustration of Griffith's newly developed editing method. The view of the stage in 37 adds nothing to our knowledge of the scene. It is inserted for purely dramatic reasons: the suspense is artificially kept up a while longer and Lincoln's complete unawareness of Booth's presence is indirectly stressed.

We have said that Griffith's editing allows for a more detailed and persuasive rendering of the drama. Two instances in this brief excerpt illustrate the point. In shot 21 Elsie points in the direction of Lincoln's box: for a moment it looks as if she has spotted the assassin; then the suspicion is allowed to die. The tantalising moment of uncertainty adds greatly to the suspense of the scene.

Again, before Lincoln is shot, we see him making the curious gesture—as if he were sitting in a draught—which suggests a momentary premonition of what is about to happen. It is a detail which poignantly foreshadows his sudden death.

Griffith's fundamental discovery, then, lies in his realisation that a film sequence must be made up of incomplete shots whose order and selection are governed by dramatic necessity. Where Porter's camera had impartially recorded the action from a distance (i.e., in long shot), Griffith demonstrated that the camera could play a positive part in telling the story. By splitting an event into short fragments and recording each from the most suitable camera position, he could vary the emphasis from shot to shot and thereby control the dramatic intensity of the events as the story progressed.

We have already noticed one application of this principle in the cross-cutting of four streams of action in the excerpt from *The Birth of a Nation*. Another application of the same principle is to be found in Griffith's use of close shots.

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Early in his career, Griffith became aware of the limitations of staging an entire scene at a fixed distance from the camera. Where he wanted to convey a character's thoughts or emotions, Griffith saw that he could best do so by taking his camera closer to the actor and recording his facial expressions in greater detail. Thus, at the moment when an actor's emotional reaction became the focal point of the scene, Griffith simply cut from the establishing long shot to a closer view; later, when the scene again reverted to broader movement, he cut back to the more comprehensive long shot.

There would be no point in quoting extensive examples of Griffith's use of close shots, for the device is completely familiar to-day. We may recall, in passing, the striking use made of it in the trial scene from *Intolerance*: close shots of The Dear One's hands, working in an agony of suspense, together with close shots of her anxious face, convey all we need to know of her state of mind as she awaits the court's judgment.

The introduction of extreme long shots is another example of Griffith's use of images which have no direct part in the plot and are employed for purely dramatic effect. The memorable panoramic views of the battle-fields in *The Birth of a Nation* give an impression of the nation-wide disaster against which the story of the Camerons and the Stonemans is told. They establish the wider context which the story's gravity demands.

An innovation similar in purpose is Griffith's use of the flashback. Here, again, Griffith saw that a character's actions could often be more clearly motivated by letting the spectator see certain thoughts or memories passing through the character's mind. In *Intolerance*, for example, when The Friendless One is just about to implicate The Boy in the murder of The Musketeer of the Slums, she has a momentary pang of conscience as she recalls the time when The Boy did her a kindness. From the scene in the present, Griffith simply mixed to the earlier scene and then mixed back again. The continuity of dramatic ideas was sufficiently forceful for the scene to be completely lucid.

The revolution in film craftsmanship which followed Griffith's many innovations was felt in various ways in the routine of production. Armed with his new editing methods, Griffith was no longer obliged to stage scenes in their entirety. Where Porter might have staged an elaborate chase sequence and photographed it as it might be seen by a spectator present on the spot, Griffith took separate shots of the pursuer and the pursued. It was only when the scenes came to be edited that they conveyed the desired picture of a chase. Scenes which could previously only be recorded with great difficulty could now be assembled from easily staged shots: huge battle scenes, fatal accidents, hair-raising chases—all these could now be conveyed to the spectator by appropriate editing. The massacres of the Babylonians in *Intolerance* are presented with conviction by being reconstructed from shots of manageable length. A continuity consisting of one shot of a Persian releasing an arrow, followed by a second shot of a Babylonian, struck and falling to the ground, gives an entirely convincing picture of a scene which would have been difficult to handle in a single shot.

If Griffith's methods made the staging of spectacle scenes easier, they made the actor's task in films considerably more difficult. Acting in close shot demanded greater control and subtlety of expression than had hitherto been necessary. Whereas in Porter's time it had been necessary to over-act to convey an effect at all, the camera's proximity imposed on the actor the new discipline of restraint.

Yet, while the actor's task became more exacting, the prime responsibility for conveying an effect passed from his hands into those of the director. The suspense leading up to the murder of Lincoln (achieved by devices like the quick cut-away to shot 37) is conveyed not primarily by the actors but by the manner in which the

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events are arranged. The director controls the order and manner in which the spectator sees consecutive shots and can therefore highlight or flatten a scene as he chooses. If he cuts to a close shot, the very appearance of the larger image implies to the spectator that a moment of greater dramatic intensity has arrived. The effect of an actor's performance in a shot is thus conditioned by the way the director decides to place the camera and by the context in which he chooses to show it.

The control of the element of timing is equally transferred from the actor to the director in Griffith's films. Griffith's splitting up of scenes into small components raises a new question for the editor. How long should each shot be left on the screen? An examination of the excerpt from *The Birth of a Nation* reveals how the timing of shots can be made to play a significant part in controlling the impact of a scene. The pace of cutting is increased towards the climax to give an impression of mounting tension. Griffith's famous chase sequences—the technique of cross-cutting in the final chase of an action picture was, for a long time, known in the industry as the “Griffith last minute rescue”—all gained a great deal of their effectiveness from the tempo at which they were edited. The cutting rate was invariably increased towards the climax, giving the impression that the excitement was steadily mounting.

Rhythmic effects of this kind are, unfortunately, extremely difficult to analyse without direct reference to the film itself and we shall have to content ourselves, at this stage, with drawing attention to Griffith's awareness of their importance. Since a consideration of the control of tempo and rhythm in Griffith's films would cover points we shall consider later, more detailed discussion is held over to Chapter 14.

Pudovkin: Constructive Editing

D. W. Griffith's genius was essentially the genius of a storyteller; his great achievement lay in his discovery and application of editing methods which enabled him to enrich and strengthen the narrative power of the film medium. The Russian director Sergei Eisenstein, in his essay, *Dickens, Griffith, and the Film To-day*,⁸ describes the manner in which Griffith translated the literary devices and conventions of the novelist (particularly of Dickens) into their film equivalents. Eisenstein points out that devices such as cross-cutting, close shots, flash-backs, even dissolves, have literary parallels and that all Griffith did was to find them. Having analysed the origin of Griffith's methods, Eisenstein goes on to explain their influence on the young Russian directors. Deeply impressed by Griffith's pioneering work, they nevertheless felt it was lacking in one important respect.

To the parallelism of alternating close-ups of America [i.e., of Griffith] we [i.e., the young Russian directors] offer the contrast of uniting these in fusion; the montage trope.

In the theory of literature a *trope* is defined thus: a figure of speech which consists in the use of a word or phrase in a sense other than that which is proper to it, for example, a *sharp* wit (normally, a *sharp* sword).

Griffith's cinema does not know this type of montage construction. His close-ups create atmosphere, outline traits of characters, alternate in dialogues of leading characters, and close-ups of the chaser and the chased speed up the tempo of the chase. But Griffith at all times remains on a level of *representation and objectivity* and nowhere does he try through the *juxtaposition* of shots to shape *import and image*.⁹

⁸ *Film Form by Sergei Eisenstein*. Dobson, 1951.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 240.

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In other words, where Griffith was content to tell his stories by means of the kind of editing construction we have already seen in the excerpt from *The Birth of a Nation*, the young Russian directors felt that they could take the film director's control over his material a stage further. They planned, by means of new editing methods, not only to tell stories but to interpret and draw intellectual conclusions from them.

Griffith had attempted just this in *Intolerance*. By telling four stories, each illustrating his title theme, and presenting them in parallel, he meant to express his central idea. Eisenstein conceded that the four stories of *Intolerance* were well told but maintained that the central idea failed to get across: the generalisation Griffith wanted to make failed to reach the audience because it was nowhere directly expressed. This failure, Eisenstein argued, arose from Griffith's misunderstanding of the nature of editing.

Out of this [*misunderstanding*] came his unsuccessful use of the repeated refrain shot: Lillian Gish rocking a cradle. Griffith had been inspired to translate these lines of Walt Whitman:

"... endlessly rocks the cradle, Uniter of Here and Hereafter."

not in structure, nor in *the harmonic recurrence of montage expressiveness*, but in *an isolated picture*, with the result that the cradle could not possibly be *abstracted into an image of eternally reborn epochs* and remained inevitably simply a *life-like cradle*, calling forth derision, surprise or vexation in the spectator.¹⁰

Eisenstein concluded that if generalised ideas of the kind Griffith attempted to express in *Intolerance* were to be conveyed in the film medium, then entirely new methods of editing—of montage—would have to be evolved. And this he understood to be the task of the young Russian directors.

To understand the unique contribution to the cinema made by the early Russian film-makers, it is necessary to know a little of the state of the Soviet film industry in the silent period. Eisenstein has described how he and his colleagues, starting their work in the cinema, found themselves in an industry almost completely devoid of native traditions. Such films as had been made in Russia before the revolution were mainly undistinguished commercial quickies whose artificiality was alien to the young revolutionary directors who saw themselves as propagandists and teachers rather than as conventional entertainers. As such, their task was two-fold: to use the film medium as a means of instructing the masses in the history and theory of their political movement and to train a young generation of film-makers to fulfil this task.

These circumstances produced two noteworthy results. First, the young directors set about finding new ways by which to express ideas in the film medium so that they could communicate these in their political cause. Second, they went about developing a theory of film-making which Griffith, busy and essentially instinctive worker that he was, had never attempted to do.

The theoretical writing of the Russian directors falls into two separate schools. On the one hand are the views of Pudovkin and Kuleshov, most succinctly laid down in Pudovkin's book, *Film Technique*; on the other, the more erratic, less systematically presented writing of Eisenstein. Pudovkin's contribution to film theory is to a large extent a rationalisation of Griffith's work. Where Griffith was content to solve his problems as they

¹⁰ *Film Form* by Sergei Eisenstein. Dobson, 1951, p. 241.

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arose, Pudovkin formulated a theory of editing which could be used as a general guiding system. He started from first principles.

If we consider the work of the film director, then it appears that the active raw material is no other than those *pieces of celluloid* on which, from various viewpoints, the separate movements of the action have been shot. From nothing but these pieces is created those appearances upon the screen that form the filmic representation of the action shot. And thus the material of the film director consists not of real processes happening in real space and real time, but of those pieces of celluloid on which these processes have been recorded. This celluloid is entirely subject to the will of the director who edits it. He can, in the composition of the filmic form of any given appearance, eliminate all points of interval, and thus concentrate the action in time to the highest degree he may require.¹¹

Having thus stated the principle of what he called *constructive editing*, Pudovkin went on to demonstrate how it could be applied—and, indeed, had been applied by Griffith—in the course of film narrative.

In order to show on the screen the fall of a man from a window five storeys high, the shots can be taken in the following way:

First, the man is shot falling from the window into a net, in such a way that the net is not visible on the screen; then the same man is shot falling from a slight height to the ground. Joined together, the two shots give in projection the desired impression. The catastrophic fall never occurs in reality, it occurs only on the screen, and is the resultant of two pieces of celluloid joined together. From the event of a real, actual fall of a person from an appalling height, two points only are selected: the beginning of the fall and its end. The intervening passage through the air is eliminated. It is not proper to call the process a trick; it is a method of filmic representation exactly corresponding to the elimination of the five years that divide a first act from a second upon a stage.¹²

Up to this point, Pudovkin's writing merely provides a theoretical explanation of what Griffith had already done in practice. From here onward, however, Pudovkin's theory begins to diverge from Griffith's work. Where Griffith staged scenes in long shot and used inserted close shots of details to heighten the drama, Pudovkin held that a more impressive continuity could be obtained by constructing a sequence purely from these significant details. This change of attitude, as will be seen from one of Pudovkin's examples, is more than a matter of differently explaining a given method, for it affects the director's approach to his subject from the moment the script is conceived.

Scene 1. A peasant waggon, sinking in the mud, slowly trails along a country road. Sadly and reluctantly the hooded driver urges on his tired horse. A figure cowers into the corner of the waggon, trying to wrap itself in an old soldier's cloak for protection against the penetrating wind. A passer-by, coming towards the waggon, pauses, standing inquisitively. The driver turns to him.

Title: *Is it far to Nakhabin?*

The pedestrian answers, pointing with his hand. The waggon sets onward, while the passer-by stares after it and then continues on his way. . . .

A scenario written in this way, already divided into separate scenes and with titles, forms the first phase of filmic overhaul. . . . Note that there is a whole series of details characteristic for the given scene and emphasised by their literary form, such as, for example, "sinking in the mud," "sadly the driver," "a passenger, wrapped in a soldier's cloak," "the

¹¹ Film Technique by *V.I. Pudovkin*. *News*, 1929, p. 56.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 57.

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piercing wind”—none of these details will reach the spectator if they are introduced merely as incidentals in shooting the scene as a whole, just as it is written. The film possesses essentially specific and highly effective methods by means of which the spectator can be made to notice each separate detail (mud, wind, behaviour of driver, behaviour of fare), showing them one by one, just as we should describe them in separate sequence in literary work, and not just simply to note “bad weather,” “two men in a waggon.” This method is called constructive editing.¹³

Pudovkin held that if a film narrative was to be kept continually effective, each shot must make a new and specific point. He is scornful of directors who tell their stories in long-lasting shots of an actor playing a scene, and merely punctuate them by occasional close shots of details.

Such interpolated close-ups had better be omitted—they have nothing to do with creative editing. Terms such as interpolation and cut-in are absurd expressions, the remnants of an old misunderstanding of the technical methods of the film. The details organically belonging to scenes . . . must not be interpolated into the scene, but the latter must be built out of them.¹⁴

Pudovkin arrived at these conclusions, partly from the experiments of his senior colleague Kuleshov, partly from his own experiences as a director. Kuleshov’s experiments had revealed to him that the process of editing is more than a method for telling a continuous story. He found that by suitable juxtaposition, shots could be given meanings which they had hitherto not possessed. If, Pudovkin argued, one were to join a shot of a smiling actor to a close shot of a revolver, and follow this by another shot of the actor, now terrified, the total impression of the sequence would be to suggest that the actor was behaving in a cowardly manner. If, on the other hand, the two shots of the actor were reversed, the audience would see the actor’s behaviour as heroic. Thus, although the same shots would have been used in the two cases, a different emotional effect would be achieved by simply reversing their order.

In another experiment, Pudovkin and Kuleshov took close-ups of the actor Mosjukhin and used them to edit three experimental sequences. In the first, they joined the shots of the actor—whose expression in them was neutral—to shots of a plate of soup standing on a table; in the second, to a shot of a coffin in which lay a dead woman; in the third, to a shot of a little girl playing with a toy.

When we showed the three combinations to an audience which had not been let into the secret the result was terrific. The public raved about the acting of the artist. They pointed out the heavy pensiveness of his mood over the forgotten soup, were touched and moved by the deep sorrow with which he looked on the dead woman, and admired the light, happy smile with which he surveyed the girl at play. But we knew that in all three cases the face was exactly the same.¹⁵

So impressed were Pudovkin and Kuleshov with this ability to create effects by shot juxtaposition that they formulated the method into an aesthetic credo:

From our contemporary point of view, Kuleshov’s ideas were extremely simple. All he said was this: “In every art there must be firstly a material, and secondly a method of composing this material specially adapted to this art.” The musician has sounds as material and composes them in time. The painter’s materials are colour, and he combines them in space on the surface of the canvas . . .

Kuleshov maintained that the material in filmwork consists of pieces of film, and that the composition method is their joining together in a particular, creatively discovered order. He maintained that film art does not begin when the artists

¹³Film Technique by V.I. Pudovkin. *Newnes*, 1929, pp. 22, 23.

¹⁴*Ibid.*, p. 23.

¹⁵Film Technique by V.I. Pudovkin. *Newnes*, 1929, p. 140.

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act and the various scenes are shot—this is only the preparation of the material. Film art begins from the moment when the director begins to combine and join together the various pieces of film. By joining them in various combinations in different orders, he obtains differing results.¹⁶

Although this appears to-day an almost absurdly exaggerated statement of the importance of the editing process, Pudovkin achieved remarkable results when he put it into practice. Comparing his silent films with those of Griffith, one finds the very differences which Pudovkin's theoretical writings might have led one to expect. Where the narrative of Griffith's films reaches the spectator through the behaviour and movement of the actors, Pudovkin builds his scenes from carefully planned series of details and achieves his effects by their juxtapositions. As a result his narrative passages are more concentrated in their effect but less personal in their appeal.

This difference in editing style and therefore of emotional effect is, of course, primarily a reflection of the two directors' differing dramatic intentions. While Griffith is usually most concerned with human conflicts, Pudovkin is often more interested in the sidelights and overtones of the story than in the conflicts themselves. Pudovkin's plots are always, in sheer quantity of incident, simpler than Griffith's and he allots a greater proportion of screen time to exploring their implications and significance.

In *The End of St. Petersburg* Pudovkin has a sequence of the 1914–1918 war in which soldiers are fighting and dying in the muddy trenches. To strengthen the impact of this, he cross-cuts the shots of the trenches with a sequence showing the city-dwelling financiers crazily rushing to the stock exchange to cash in on the rising market prices. One feels that Pudovkin's aim in editing his scene in this way was not so much to score a political point as to strengthen the emotional effect of the trench scenes. These, indeed, depend for their effect almost entirely upon the juxtaposition of the two actions, for the soldiers at the front are shown almost exclusively in long shot and none of them is individually identified.

Another equally characteristic Pudovkin continuity occurs in *Mother* when the son is just about to be released from prison. Pudovkin has described its making as follows:

In . . . *Mother*, I tried to affect the spectators not by the psychological performance of an actor, but by plastic synthesis through editing. The son sits in prison. Suddenly, passed in to him surreptitiously, he receives a note that next day he is to be set free. The problem was the expression, filmically, of his joy. The photographing of a face lighting up with joy would have been flat and void of effect. I show, therefore, the nervous play of his hands and a big close-up of the lower half of his face, the corners of the smile. These shots I cut in with other and varied material—shots of a brook, swollen with the rapid flow of spring, of the play of sunlight broken on the water, birds splashing in the village pond, and finally, a laughing child. By the junction of these components our expression of prisoner's joy takes shape.¹⁷

In *The Art of the Film* Ernest Lindgren puts forward a detailed and highly illuminating analysis of this passage. He points out, among other things, that Pudovkin's description of the sequence is incomplete and hardly does justice to it. From our point of view, however, the director's account is sufficiently full to make its main point: that instead of attempting to play the scene on the actor's face, a complex montage sequence is employed to convey an emotional effect.

¹⁶Ibid., pp. 138, 139.

¹⁷Film Technique by V.I. Pudovkin. Newnes, 1929, p. xviii.

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Pudovkin's films abound in passages of this kind, where the relationship between shots is purely one of idea or emotion (although, as Lindgren has pointed out in this case, Pudovkin makes the images of the stream, birds, etc., appear to be a natural part of the continuity by prefacing them with the title, "And outside it is spring"). In this sense, his films already contain hints of the sort of continuities employed by Eisenstein which, as we shall see, are even further removed from Griffith's straightforward narratives.

Eisenstein: Intellectual Montage

In Pudovkin's silent films it is always the dramatic situation which remains foremost in the spectator's mind: the indirect comments on the story never become an end in themselves; they merely serve to heighten the drama. In Eisenstein's silent films, particularly in *October* and *Old and New*, the balance between plot and comment is, as it were, tipped the other way. To Eisenstein—and we are here speaking of his silent films only—the story merely provides a convenient structure upon which to build an exposition of ideas; to him, it is the conclusions and abstractions which can be drawn from the actual events which are of first interest.

Eisenstein's methods of what he himself has called *intellectual montage* are fully described in his own theoretical writings. These, in translation, are often extremely obscure and, since they depend on a series of definitions peculiar to the writer's method, difficult to summarise. Let us therefore, before passing on to the theory, look at a passage of intellectual cinema from one of Eisenstein's silent films and attempt to analyse the difference between his and his predecessors' editing techniques. In doing so, we shall keep faith with Eisenstein's theoretical approach, which was always a direct rationalisation of his practical work.

OCTOBER

Reel 3

- 1-17 **The interior of the Winter Palace in St. Petersburg. Kerensky, head of the provisional government, attended by two lieutenants, is slowly walking down the vast palatial corridor. He moves up the stairs: *inter-cut* with a number of slow-moving shots of Kerensky proudly ascending the stairway, are separate *titles* describing Kerensky's rank: *Commander-in-Chief, Minister of War and Marine, etcetera, etcetera, etcetera.***
- 18 **C.S. A garland in the hands of one of the palace statues.**
- 19 **F.S. The whole statue, holding the garland.**
- 20 **C.S. Garland, as in 18.**
- 21 **Title: *Hope of his Country and the Revolution.***
- 22 **Shooting up towards another statue holding a garland. (*The angle of the camera makes it appear as if the statue were just about to deposit the garland on Kerensky's head.*)**
- 23 **Title: *Alexander Fedorovitch Kerensky.***
- 24 **C.U. Kerensky's face, still and intense.**
- 25 **C.S. Garland in the statue's hands.**
- 26 **C.U. Kerensky, as in 24. His expression relaxes into a smile.**
- 27 **C.S. Garland, as in 25.**
- 28-39 **Kerensky ascends the stairway farther and is greeted by the Czar's large, richly decorated footman. Kerensky, despite attempts at dignity, looks small beside this imposing figure. He is introduced to a whole line of footmen and shakes hands with each one. *What a democrat!***

- 40–74 Kerensky waits before the huge ornate palace doors leading to the Czar's private quarters. We see the Czar's coat-of-arms on the doors. Kerensky waits helplessly for the doors to open. Two footmen smile. Kerensky's boots, then his gloved hands, seen in *close-up*, moving in impatient gestures. The two Lieutenants are ill at ease. *We cut* to the head of an ornamental toy peacock; it wags its head, then proudly spreads its tail into a fan; it starts revolving, performing a sort of dance, its wings shining. The huge doors open. A footman smiles. Kerensky walks through the doors and farther doors ahead of him are opened one by one. (*The action of opening the doors is repeated several times without matching the movements on the cuts.*) The peacock's head comes to rest and stares, as if in admiration, after Kerensky's receding figure.
- 75–79 *Cut* to soldiers, sailors and Bolshevik workers, listlessly waiting in prison; then to Lenin, hiding in the misty marshes.
- 80–99 Kerensky in the private apartment of the Czar. Close shots of rows of crockery, the Czarist initial A on everything including the imperial chamber pots. *In the apartments of the Czarina—Alexandra Fedorovna*: more shots of rows of crockery, ornamental furniture, tassels, the Czarina's bed. Kerensky lying on the bed (*shown in three consecutive shots from different angles*). *Alexander Fedorovitch*. More ornamental tassels, etc.
- 100–105 *In the library of Nicholas II*. Kerensky, standing by the desk in the Czar's library, a very small figure in these grand surroundings. Three more shots of Kerensky *from progressively farther away* and emphasising Kerensky's smallness in this huge palatial room. Kerensky picks up a piece of paper from the desk.
- 106 *Title: The Decree Restoring the Death Penalty.*
- 107 *M.S.* Kerensky sitting at the desk, thinking.
- 108 *L.S.* Kerensky. He leans over the desk and signs.
- 109 *Shooting down* from the top of a palace staircase towards Kerensky, as, slowly, he approaches the foot of the stairs.
- 110 *C.S.* A servant watching.
- 111–124 Kerensky, head bowed, hand in his jacket Napoleon-fashion, slowly ascends the stairs. A servant and one of the Lieutenants are watching. *M.S.* Kerensky, looking down, arms folded. Statuette of Napoleon in the same attitude. The servant and Lieutenant salute. A row of tall, palace wine glasses. Another row of glasses. A row of tin soldiers, *similarly disposed about the screen*.
- 125 *C.S.* Kerensky, sitting at a table. In front of him stand four separate quarters of a four-way decanter. They are standing side by side on the table; Kerensky stares down at them.
- 126 *C.S.* Kerensky's hands manipulating the four decanter bottles into position.
- 127 *M.S.* Kerensky.
- 128 *C.S.* Kerensky's hands.
- 129 *M.S.* Kerensky. He stares at the bottles.
- 130 *C.U.* Kerensky's hand as it opens a drawer in the table and withdraws the fitting cap of the decanter—shaped like a crown—from the drawer.
- 131 *M.S.* Kerensky; he raises the crown before his eyes.
- 132 *B.C.U.* The crown.
- 133 *M.S.* Kerensky; he places the crown on top of the bottles.
- 134 *B.C.U.* The crown, now fitting over the decanter.
- 135 A factory steam whistle blowing steam.

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- 136 *B.C.U.* The crown.
- 137 The steam whistle.
- 138 *Title: The Revolution in Danger.*
- 139 *B.C.U.* The crown.
- 140 *M.S.* Kerensky, settling down to admire the crown on the top of the decanter.
- 141 *B.C.U.* The crown.
- 142 The steam whistle.
- 143–150 Inter-cut with the single words of the title *General Kornilov Is Advancing*, we see shots of the steam whistle.
- 151 *Title: All Hands to the Defence of Petrograd.*
- 152 *L.S.* of a factory. Men (Bolsheviks) holding rifles and banners, rush past the camera.
- 153 The steam whistle.
- 154 *Title: For God and Country.*
- 155 *Title: For*
- 156 *Title: God*
- Sc.
- 157 The cupola of a church.
- 158 *C.S.* a highly ornate ikon.
- 159 A tall church spire, *the image being tilted through 45 deg. to the left.*
- 160 A tall church spire (the same as above), *the image being tilted through 45 deg. to the right.*
- 161–186 Shots of grotesque religious effigies, temples, Buddhas, primitive African masks, etc.
- 187 *Title: For*
- 188 *Title: Country*
- 189–199 *Close shots* of medals, ornate uniforms, officers' lapels, etc.
- 200 *Title: Hurrah!*
- 201 The pedestal of a statue of the Czar. (The statue itself was torn down by workers in the first reel.) Fragments of the torso of the statue, lying on the ground, swing back into position on top of the pedestal.
- 202 *Title: Hurrah!*
- 203 *The same action seen in 201 from a different angle.*
- 204 *Title: Hurrah!*
- 205–209 Six short images of the religious effigies seen earlier. They appear to be smiling.
- 210–219 Other fragments of the torn-down statue of the Czar reassembling. Finally, the sceptre and then the head of the statue wobbles and settles back into position.
- 220–233 Several shots of church spires, *tilted, as before.* Church spire, *upside down.* Censers swinging. Head of Czar's statue, proudly back in position. A priest, holding a cross.
- 234–259 General Kornilov, leader of the anti-revolutionary army, sits on his horse and surveys his troops. A statue of Napoleon, astride a horse, his arm stretched forward. A similar shot of Kornilov as he raises his arm. Kerensky, still in the palace, staring at the crown at the top of the decanter, arms folded.
- Title: Two Bonapartes.* Several more images of the statue of Napoleon. A head of Napoleon *facing left.* A head of Napoleon *facing right.* The two heads on screen together, facing each other. Two grotesque figures—seen earlier—facing each other. More shots of Napoleon and another sequence of religious effigies.

- 260 **Kornilov, on his horse, giving the command to march.**
261 **A tank moves forward, hurls itself over a ditch.**
262 **Kerensky, in the Czarina's bedroom, hopelessly hurls himself on to the bed.**
263 **Fragments of the bust of Napoleon, lying scattered on the ground.**

Eisenstein's aim in making *October* was not so much to recount an historical episode as to explain the significance and ideological background of the political conflict. The film's appeal, therefore, comes from the manner in which Eisenstein has exposed certain ideas rather than from its excitement as a dramatic story. Indeed, as a piece of *narrative*, the passage we have quoted is extremely unsatisfactory. The incidents are loosely constructed and do not follow each other with the dramatic inevitability which a well-told story demands: we are not, for instance, shown Kerensky's character through a series of dramatically motivated episodes but through a number of random incidents, each suggesting a further aspect of Kerensky's vanity or incompetence. The time relationship between consecutive shots and scenes is left undefined and no sense of continuous development emerges: the cut from 108 to 109, for example, takes us—without reason or explanation—from the Czar's study to a staircase somewhere in the palace. No attempt is made to explain or to conceal the time lapse between the shots, as could easily have been done with a dissolve. The reel abounds in similar examples, showing Eisenstein's lack of interest in the simple mechanics of story-telling and his ruthless suppression of any footage not directly relevant to his thesis.

This contempt for the simplest requirement of a story-film—the ability to create the illusion of events unfolding in logical sequence—is manifested in Eisenstein's films in another way. Just as in the cut from 108 to 109 he jumps forward through time, so on other occasions he may play a scene for longer than its natural duration. In the well-known sequence of the raising of the bridges in *October*, Eisenstein photographed the action from two viewpoints: from beneath the bridge and from above. Then, in editing the material, he used both these series of shots and thereby considerably extended the screen time of the actual event. Clearly, this creates a laboured effect: the extreme emphasis Eisenstein meant to place upon the event is achieved at the expense of drawing the spectator's attention to an artificial device.

A similar instance occurs in the reel we have quoted. When Kerensky is about to enter the Czar's private quarters, the incident is stressed by repeating the shot of the opening doors without matching the cuts, i.e., by cutting back to an earlier stage in the movement of opening the doors than that with which the previous shot ended. (The whole question of matching cuts is discussed in greater detail in Chapter 14.)

Eisenstein's aim in thus breaking away from the narrative editing methods of his predecessors was to extend the power of the film medium beyond simple story-telling. "While the conventional film directs *emotions*," he wrote, "[intellectual montage] suggests an opportunity to direct the whole *thought process* as well."¹⁸ How he, in practice, availed himself of this opportunity, we shall perhaps most easily assess from his own analyses of the sequence we have quoted in detail.

¹⁸Film Form by Sergei Eisenstein. Dobson, 1951, p. 62.

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Eisenstein describes his intentions at the opening of reel 3 (shots 1–27) as follows:

Kerensky's rise to power and dictatorship after the July uprising of 1917. A comic effect was gained by sub-titles indicating regular ascending ranks ("Dictator," "Generalissimo," "Minister of Navy and of Army," etc.) climbing higher and higher—cut into five or six shots of Kerensky, climbing the stairs of the Winter Palace, all with exactly the *same* pace. Here a conflict between the flummery of the ascending ranks and the hero's trotting up the same unchanging flight of stairs yields an intellectual result: Kerensky's essential nonentity is shown satirically. We have the counterpoint of a literally expressed conventional idea with the *pictured* action of a particular person who is unequal to his swiftly increasing duties. The incongruence of these two factors results in the spectator's purely *intellectual* decision at the expense of this particular person.¹⁹

In addition to this consciously satirical staging of the scene, Eisenstein achieved a further ironic effect by continually cutting back to the statues holding the ornamental garlands as if just about to place them upon Kerensky's head. The whole passage is typical of Eisenstein's method: its "plot" is almost non-existent—Kerensky is simply walking up a staircase; it is in the comments and symbolic allusions that the meaning is conveyed.

The next incident is relatively simple: more ridicule is heaped upon Kerensky in a straightforward narrative passage. After this, in 40–74, Eisenstein resumes his oblique approach: throughout this section Kerensky stands still and all the significant meaning is conveyed by the sequence of close shots—gloves, boots, door-locks, the peacock—which produce ironic overtones quite outside the range of a more conventionally staged scene. Then, after a brief glimpse of the revolutionary fighters, Eisenstein returns to the attack, this time exposing Kerensky's petty enjoyment of the Czarist palace, seen side by side with his inability to assume the responsibilities of a ruler.

There now follows a satirical rendering of Kerensky's dreams of power. The image of Kerensky is compared with a shot of a bust of Napoleon, but the row of wine glasses, followed by the similar row of tin soldiers, promptly throws scorn on the empty pretence: the continuity suggests how temporary and meaningless are Kerensky's present surroundings and implies that his position is that of a figurehead, not in command of any real forces or authority. The image of the crown-shaped decanter stopper becomes a symbol of Kerensky's ambition (136–153) and this is inter-cut with the shot of the factory whistle—the symbol of the power of the revolutionaries. The conflict, it will be noted, is not established in terms of armies or political statements but by symbols of the two opposing ideologies. The potential drama of the situation is rendered as a clash of ideas.

Up to this point, though the continuity has abounded in side-allusions, all the images which have been used for symbolic effect were taken from Kerensky's actual surroundings. From here onward Eisenstein chooses his images at random, without reference to the story's locale. Having established that Kornilov represents the military danger, he proceeds to discredit the regime which, under the banner "For God and Country," is about to attack the Bolsheviks (see 157–186).

Kornilov's march on Petrograd was under the banner of "In the Name of God and Country." Here we attempted to reveal the religious significance of this episode in a rationalistic way. A number of religious images, from a magnificent Baroque Christ to an Eskimo idol, were cut together. The conflict in this case was between the concept and the symbolisation of God. While idea and image appear to accord completely in the first statue shown, the two elements move further from each other with each successive image. Maintaining the denotation of "God," the images increasingly disagree with our conception of God, inevitably leading to individual conclusions about the true nature of all deities.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 61, 62.

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In this case, too, a chain of images attempted to achieve a purely intellectual resolution, resulting from a conflict between a preconception and a gradual discrediting of it in purposeful steps.²⁰

Here, the whole narrative structure of the story-film is thrown aside and a continuity of purely intellectual significance is constructed. Each cut carries forward an idea instead of continuing the action of the previous shot: in continuity, the images convey an argument, not an incident. The same method is maintained in the next few shots (189–219) when the idea of “Country” is rendered in terms of the outdated military paraphernalia and, later, as the battered statue of the Czar reassembling itself. The separate threads of the argument are then tied together in 220–259 and the two figures of Kornilov and Kerensky are reduced to insignificance by satirically identifying them with “two Bonapartes.”

The final touch (261–263) is achieved by a (not altogether lucid) device which Eisenstein describes as follows:

... the scene of Kornilov's *putsch*, which puts an end to Kerensky's Bonapartist dreams. Here one of Kornilov's tanks climbs up and crushes a plaster-of-Paris Napoleon standing on Kerensky's desk in the Winter Palace, a juxtaposition of purely symbolic significance.²¹

In examples of this sort Eisenstein saw pointers to what could be achieved by “[liberating] the whole action from the definitions of time and space.”²² He envisaged that experiments along these lines would lead “towards a purely intellectual film, freed from traditional limitations, achieving direct forms for ideas, systems and concepts, without any need for transitions or paraphrases.”²³

Pudovkin, in his theory of constructive editing, claimed that a scene is most effectively presented by linking together a series of specially chosen details of the scene's action. Eisenstein emphatically opposed this view. He believed that to build up an impression by simply adding together a series of details was only the most elementary application of film editing. Instead of linking shots in smooth sequence, Eisenstein held that a proper film continuity should proceed by a series of shocks; that each cut should give rise to a conflict between the two shots being spliced and thereby create a fresh impression in the spectator's mind. “If montage is to be compared with something,” he wrote, “then a phalanx of montage pieces, of shots, should be compared to the series of explosions of an internal combustion engine, driving forward its automobile or tractor: for, similarly, the dynamics of montage serve as impulses driving forward the total film.”²⁴ And again: “the juxtaposition of two shots by splicing them together resembles not so much the simple sum of one shot plus another—as it does a creation.”²⁵

How the film-maker should set about producing and controlling these “creations” Eisenstein explained by pointing to analogies between the cinema and the other arts. He stated the principle of intellectual montage most succinctly by comparing it with the workings of hieroglyphs.

... the picture of water and the picture of an eye signifies to weep; the picture of an ear near the drawing of a door = to listen; a dog + a mouth = to bark; a mouth + a child = to scream; a mouth + a bird = to sing; a

²⁰ *Film Form by Sergei Eisenstein*. Dobson, 1951, p. 62.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 58.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 58.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 63.

²⁴ *Film Form by Sergei Eisenstein*. Dobson, 1951, p. 38.

²⁵ *Film Sense by Sergei Eisenstein*. Faber & Faber, 1943, p. 18.

Chapter 1: Editing and the Silent Film

knife + a heart = sorrow, and so on. But this is — montage! Yes. It is exactly what we do in the cinema, combining shots that are *depictive*, single in meaning, neutral in content—into *intellectual* contexts and series.²⁶

A number of obvious instances of this method occur in the excerpt we have quoted from *October*: “Kerensky’s essential nonentity” is shown by juxtaposing shots of his ceremonial ascent of the palace staircase with the titles (“Dictator, Generalissimo,” etc.) and with the shots of the statues holding garlands; his ambition is rendered in the contrast with the shots of the bust of Napoleon; the shot of the tank hurling itself over a ditch followed by Kerensky, flinging himself on a bed, conveys the impression of Kerensky’s incapacity as a ruler.

Eisenstein believed that the director’s function was to evolve series of shot conflicts of this sort and to express his ideas through the new meanings which arose from them. He held that the ideal film continuity was one in which every cut produced this momentary shock. There is nowhere in his films any attempt at smooth cutting: his continuities proceed by a series of collisions, giving an impression of a constantly shifting and developing argument.

Eisenstein classified the various kinds of conflicts possible between adjacent images in terms of contrasting composition, scale, depth of field, photographic key and so on. Any feature of the picture could be abruptly varied in adjacent shots in order to give rise to the desired conflict. Here, for instance, is his description of one of the juxtapositions from the anti-religious passage we have quoted in which the contrasting shapes of the objects photographed produce the momentary shock.

In illustrating the monarchist *putsch* attempted by General Kornilov, it occurred to me that his militarist *tendency* could be shown in a montage that would employ religious details for its material. For Kornilov had revealed his intention in the guise of a peculiar Crusade of Moslems (!), . . . against the Bolsheviki. So we intercut shots of a Baroque Christ (apparently exploding in the radiant beams of his halo) with shots of an egg-shaped mask of Uzume, Goddess of Mirth, completely self-contained. The temporal conflict between the closed egg-form and the graphic star-form produced the effect of an instantaneous *burst*—of a bomb, or shrapnel.²⁷

This example, while it illustrates Eisenstein’s intellectual montage at its most complex, also gives a hint of the method’s main weakness—its frequent obscurity. The conflicting compositions of the two images create, according to Eisenstein’s analysis, “the effect of instantaneous *burst*—of a bomb, or shrapnel,” and therefore indirectly throw light on Kornilov’s militarism. It is pertinent to ask whether the intended effect does, in practice, reach the audience. The “burst,” as seen by the spectator, is a purely pictorial one and it is difficult to see why he should associate it with Kornilov’s “military tendency.” The effect, which on paper looks ingeniously double-edged, fails when put on the screen because it remains obscure.

This is perhaps an extreme example of the obscurities which occur fairly frequently in Eisenstein’s films. In most instances, the difficulty is not so much that the passages of intellectual cinema are incomprehensible, as that many of the references escape the spectator on first viewing, and demand from him an amount of study and analysis that few are in the position to devote to a film. Whether this obscurity is inherent in Eisenstein’s method, it is difficult to say. He only worked with the *genre* consistently in two films and the whole system of intellectual cinema may perhaps be said never to have got beyond the experimental stage.

²⁶Film Form, p. 30.

²⁷Film Form by Sergei Eisenstein. Dobson, 1951, p. 56.