

Notes on Editing the Documentary v.1

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The visual/aural editing process is unique to cinema. Other aspects of cinema originated in a different medium (photography, art direction, writing, sound recording).

What are the most common genres of documentary film? Each genre has a set of codes and conventions associated with it:

- docudrama,
- historical,
- personal,
- character-based,
- theme-based,
- experimental,
- cinéma vérité,
- direct cinema,
- ethnographic,
- activist,
- other forms?

What is the grammar of documentary film?

The editor writes/assembles/constructs the documentary using rhythm, pace, sequencing, and effects to craft a compelling story.

Topics for discussion:

- telling a story through images and sound,
- emotion and audience engagement,
- structure and creating a narrative,
- films with/without interviews,
- films with/without narration,
- observational films,
- shots, scenes, sequences, and rhythm,
- cutaways and reaction shots,
- effective use of b-roll,
- compressing time,
- creating continuity,
- layering of ambient sounds, dialog, and sound effects, and
- creating a sequence.

We typically, but not always, establish four Ws within each sequence:

- Who are the characters?
- What is the situation?
- Where does it take place?
- Why is this relevant to the story?

Interest in “what happens next?” keeps the audience interested, a sequence of events should be followed by a moment of reflection before the next sequence begins.

Shot types:

- XCU
- CU
- MCU
- MS
- MLS
- LS
- XLS
- 2S
- OSS

The **edit** is a transition between two shots (typically a cut, sometimes a dissolve, fade, or effect).

The **six elements**¹ of the edit:

- **Motivation** (there should be a reason, or motivation, for the edit, it may be either emotional, visual, aural, or any combination of the three),
- **Information** (each new shot provides the the viewer with new information),
- **Composition** (when there’s a choice, select the shots with the best composition),
- **Sound** (is more abstract than image, you need not hear what you see or see what you hear, it’s an additional layer, sound is tied to emotion, it creates atmosphere, mood, tension, etc.),
- **Camera Angle** (the camera should change angle from one shot to the next),
- **Continuity** (the movement or action should be both evident and similar between the two shots), the should be continuity of: Content, Movement, Position, and Sound.

An ideal cut should contain all six elements, but typically will not.

Most cuts are seamless, when they are not, they are called jump cuts. Jump cuts can be very effective when used

¹ based in part on Roy Thompson, *Grammar of the Edit*, Focal Press, 1993.

properly, but start with smooth cuts. Classic Hollywood continuity achieves seamlessness primarily by following the following rules of continuity:

- **180° Rule.** Two people in conversation with each other must maintain the same left/right relationship throughout the scene. If the camera “crosses the line” between the characters and shoots them from the other side, this will disorient the viewer.
- **30° Rule.** Between two shots in the same space, the camera should change angle by a minimum of 30° between cuts.
- **Shot-reverse-shot structure.** A structure in which reverse shots are similar in terms of composition and follow 180° rule helps the viewer experience a unified space between the shots.
- **Cut on action.** Viewers focus their attention on actions, so when the cut is connected with an action (e.g. moving one’s hand towards a handle and then cutting with an angle change to a close up of the hand grabbing the handle) it creates the perception of continuous motion through the shot.
- **Eye-line match.** When a person is looking towards an object or another person, the shot matches spatially to what the person is looking at.
- **Sound bridging.** Sounds and ambience are continuous between shots.

The rules are just a starting point, editing requires a willingness to experiment and explore with the material, emotion and story are your primary guides. What is a good edit or bad edit? This is highly subjective and contextual.

The editor works like a magician drawing attention away from one thing and towards another. Doing a good job of drawing the viewer’s attention will hide many of the action mismatches that are inevitable in documentary. For example, when someone is talking, the viewers attention is focused on the speaking person’s face, and therefore the viewer will probably not notice other elements in the shot. Often we are using cutaways to draw the viewers attention away from what otherwise would be a bunch of jump cuts. But it can be so much more than that, the images can help tell the story, they can, and should be, more than cutaways, they are visual elements helping you tell the story.

One way we show details is through close-ups. Establishing shots provide context, medium shots and close-ups provide the dramatic energy in dramatic documentaries, while medium shots work well in lighter documentaries.

Continuity editing is not the only model. In contrast, Sergei Eisenstein regarded montage as a dialectical means of creating meaning and the foundation of film art. By contrasting two unrelated shots, he tried to provoke associations in the viewer, which were induced by the

collision between the shots. Eisenstein wrote that the **shot** was a montage cell, and **montage** was the collision of two pieces in conflict from which arises a new, third concept. Eisenstein (in contrast to Pudovkin who thought of montage as linkage) thinks of it as a collision, linkage is just a special case of montage. Eisenstein suggested that montage was the “explosion” which drives the film forward. In his writings, Eisenstein used language like “film must plough the psyche of the viewer” and he believed that artists were “the engineers of the soul.” The principle of conflict/counterpoint can be expressed in terms of direction, scale, volume, mass, depth.

According to Walter Murch there are six main criteria² for evaluating a cut or deciding where to cut. They are (in order, most important first):

- **Emotion.** Does the cut reflect what the editor believes the audience should be feeling at that moment?
- **Story.** Does the cut advance the story?
- **Rhythm.** Does the cut occur “at a moment that is rhythmically interesting and ‘right’”?
- **Eye-trace.** Does the cut pay respect to “the location and movement of the audience’s focus of interest within the frame”?
- **Two-dimensional plane of the screen.** Does the cut respect the 180° rule?
- **Three-dimensional space of action.** Is the cut true to the physical/spatial relationships within the diegesis?

Recommended Reading

Directing the Documentary by Michael Rabiger (5th ed.)

In the Blink of an Eye by Walter Murch (2nd ed.)

Documentary Storytelling: Making Stronger and More Dramatic Nonfiction Films (2nd ed.) by Sheila Curran Bernard

Cinematic Storytelling: The 100 Most Powerful Film Conventions Every Filmmaker Must Know by Jennifer Van Sijll

The Conversations: Walter Murch and the Art of Editing Film by Michael Ondaatje

On Film Editing: An Introduction to the Art of Film Construction by Edward Dmytryk

² Walter Murch, *In the Blink of an Eye*, 2nd ed., Silman-James Press, 2001