

INGLORIOUS EDITORS

A VIEW INTO THE CUTTING ROOM

Whatever part(s) you play on a film—writer, director, actor, cinematographer, hair stylist, etc.—your work ends up in the hands of the editor. Since the editor takes your work and turns it into the product the audience will see, it's important to know how editors think and why they make the choices they do.

WHAT AN EDITOR SEES

Editing, which is often compared to sculpting, involves deciding what to put in and what to leave out in creating a movie. “Left on the cutting room floor” is a well-known editing cliché. How does an editor judge which shots and frames to omit and which to put in?

Immersed in myriad shots on a digital monitor, an editor addresses many elements simultaneously: Lighting, continuity, story, pace, emotion, shot angle, shot type, sound and more. A huge factor driving the “in or out” decision is a question that is never far from the editor’s mind: How much does the audience need to know?

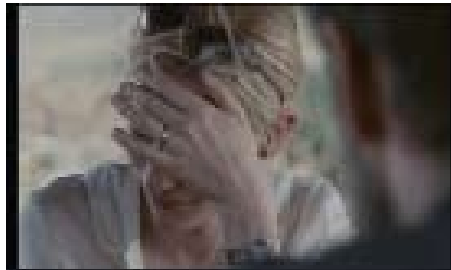
Viewers are savvy; they can get what’s going on in a second or two. Here are a few types of cuts that illustrate how quickly an audience takes in information:

SUBLIMINAL CUT

EYELINE MATCH CUT

An eyeline match cut is where the characters’ lines of vision—their eyelines—match so that they appear to be looking at each other.

The three cuts below are from a dialogue scene in *Babel* between a married couple, played by Cate Blanchett and Brad Pitt. In Cuts 1 and 2, their eyelines don’t match. The audience quickly perceives that they have become disconnected after the death of their baby.



The matching eyelines in Cut 3 show the couple beginning to grapple with their pain and each other.



Babel

FLASH CUT

A flash cut is a short cut (under one second) that swiftly gets inside a character’s head.

In these cuts, selected from a scene in *The Aviator*, Howard Hughes (played by Leonardo

DiCaprio) arrives at a movie premiere, where the sight and sound of photographers’ flashbulbs assault him. *Flash! Flash! Flash! Jab! Jab! Jab!* The audience sees his pain and feels it in their guts as he reels up the red carpet.

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CHANGING TIME

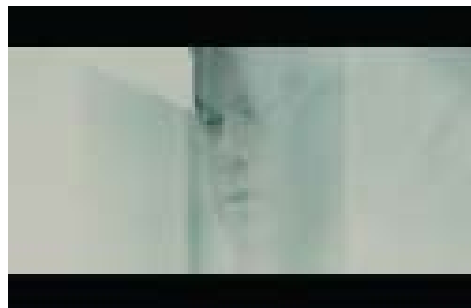
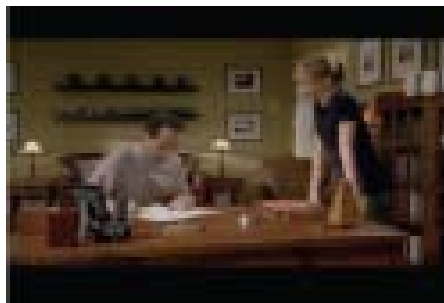
Flash cuts and subliminal cuts are examples of cuts that compress time. Conversely, an editor can make cuts that, like a rest or full note in music, prolong the action. This type of cut expands time. Here’s an example from the TV series “Monk.” In this scene, Monk’s obsessive compulsive disorder is palpable as he takes forever to remove his assistant’s paycheck from his checkbook. The scene was composed of many more than these four cuts along with a sound effect of tearing and the series’ theme music to expand time and make the comedy work.

Effects, such as the commonly used slow motion, can also expand time in scenes.



Shorter than a flash cut, a subliminal cut consists of a few frames that zip by so fast that the audience is only subliminally, or subconsciously, aware of them.

Flash cuts contribute heavily to *The Bourne Ultimatum*, a high-energy thriller (and the third in a trilogy) for which the editor won the Academy Award. In the sequence below, Jason Bourne (Matt Damon) is being chased in a dark-lit building as his past intercepts him in a series of brightly lit, subliminal cuts. The audience perceives the confusion that his past—where he was tortured—causes him.



SLOW MOTION CUT

A slow motion cut is an effect where the pace of the action is decreased from what occurred in reality in front of the camera. This retardation is used ubiquitously in action scenes so the audience can grasp what’s happening and to intensify the action.

In the scene below, from *Fahrenheit 9/11*, shots of paper wafting down from the fallen World Trade Center towers are shown in slow motion to create impact and allow for narration.



Fahrenheit 9/11

FREEZE-FRAME

Freeze-frame is an effect where the action holds still (or freezes) for as many frames as desired.

Freeze-frames expand time by stopping it to hold an image, idea or plot point in the audience’s mind. They’re frequently used to prolong a character’s triumph (e.g. winning a race) or tribulation (e.g. the death of a loved one). Increasingly, they’re used to halt the action and allow a character to directly address the audience.



Ratatouille

This freeze frame above shows Little Chef, the main character in *Ratatouille*, freaking out when he’s caught inside a human’s kitchen.

BUILDING STORY

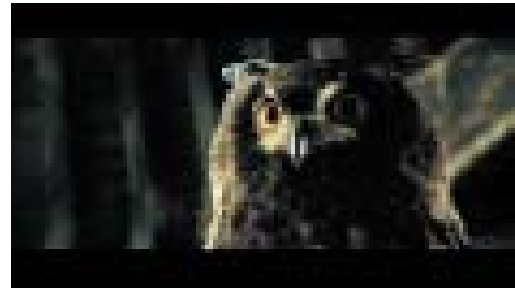
Editing is not just about what to leave out and how long to make a cut to sustain audience attention. It’s also about building the story, cut by cut. Editors believe that every cut must be motivated—it must have a reason for being in the movie.

This means that each cut must provide the audience with information about the plot, character, location and/or subject. If a cut—no matter how short—does not do any of these things, it has no place in the film. Here are some common types of cuts that demonstrate how cuts move the story along:

CUTAWAY A.K.A. INSERT

A cutaway, or insert, is a cut to a small, significant detail of a scene.

Primarily, cutaways serve to convey necessary information to the audience. A common example is a cutaway to a letter, as illustrated by this sequence from *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire*, where



Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire

Harry’s owl brings him a note.

Routinely, cutaways act as introductions to scenes or segues between scenes forwarding the flow of information, moving the story from one location to another and/or from one time to another, for example past to present.

In the below scene from *Cars*, the cutaway shot shows a stoplight and takes the action from one scene to a reverse angle in another scene.

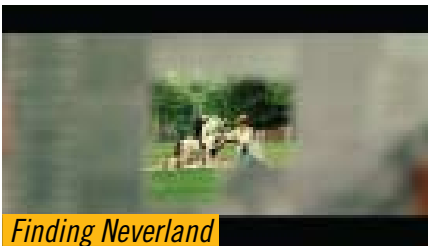
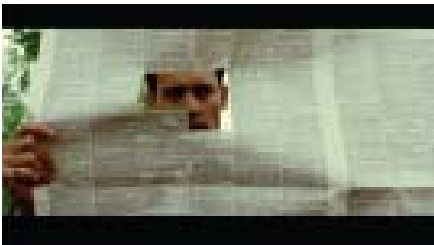


Cars

POV (POINT OF VIEW)

A POV shot is a reverse cut that corresponds to where a character is looking or what he or she is seeing.

A POV is a highly motivated cut; a character sees something and the audience wants to see it, too. POVs are often framed by an object such as a window, gun sight, mirror or a pair of binoculars. Here J.M. Barrie (Johnny Depp) peers through a newspaper to gaze at Sylvia Llewellyn Davies (Kate Winslet) in *Finding Neverland*.

**Finding Neverland****REACTION CUT**

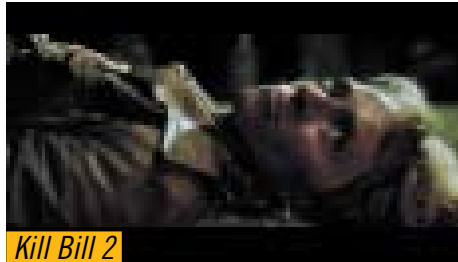
A reaction cut is a cut to a participant reacting to something that has just happened.

The power of cutting in a reaction cannot be underestimated. Reactions show what characters or documentary subjects are feeling and key viewers' emotional response: Should they hold their

breath? Laugh? Cry? Worry? Get angry?

In the shot below, The Bride (Uma Thurman) reacts with determination as she lies in a coffin, buried alive.

Cutting in a series of reactions

**Kill Bill 2**

intensifies the emotion and the action. In *Fahrenheit 9/11*, the editor used no shots of the World Trade Center towers falling; the impact of the disaster was shown on the faces of the people watching from the street. Here are a few of the reaction shots that told the tale.

While there is a lot more to the job and role of the editor than space allows here, the hows and whys of choosing shots and effects are one of the most intriguing aspects of the job. Next time you're watching a movie, notice the cuts and think about their impact on you, the audience. If you're viewing a show on TV or the Internet, mute the sound to see how the cuts flow (and yes, see mismatches you hadn't previously noticed). Then re-watch the scene with the sound on and the picture off to appreciate how effective the audio is at conveying mood, story and information.

Understanding cuts and editing will enhance your viewing experience and make you a stronger, more well-rounded moviemaker.

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Gael Chandler (www.joyoffilmediting.com) has edited dramas, documentaries and more and has received two Cable ACE nominations for editing a comedy series. She has taught digital editing systems to professionals and editing theory and practice to college students.

**Fahrenheit 9/11**