I. INTENSIFIED CONTINUITY: FOUR DIMENSIONS

Four strategies of camerawork and editing seem central to the new style: rapid editing, bipolar extremes of lens lengths, reliance on close shots, and wide-ranging camera movements. Most of these techniques have been remarked on before, often by irritated critics, but none has been considered closely, and we haven’t sufficiently appreciated how they work together to create a coherent set of artistic choices. Further, despite technological progress on many fronts, the choices available to filmmakers have narrowed since the studio era. The strategies I’ll be discussing have become dominant, even domineering: increasingly filmmakers aren’t encouraged to explore other options. This situation marks, as I’ll suggest in the final pages of this essay, a loss of some expressive resources of studio-era cinema.

Picking Up the Pace

Everybody thinks that movies are being cut faster now, but how fast is fast? And faster compared to what? Pop journalism has tried to clue us in. “Your average movie,” notes one writer in 1999, “has 600 or 700 cuts.” Hollywood practitioners commonly say that films typically average about 1,100–1,200 shots. Both sets of figures underestimate the accelerating speed of today’s editing.

In the 1920s, Hollywood films were cut quite fast, averaging four to six seconds per shot, but the arrival of sound put on the brakes. Between 1930 and 1960, most feature films contained between three hundred and seven hundred shots, so the average shot length (ASL) hovered between 8 and 11 seconds. Even in the B-film range, one must look hard to find movies averaging less than that. The A-features that are cut very quickly often owe their pace to cramped production schedules or the need to patch together stock footage. Tarzan Finds a Son (1939) averages a hectic 3.6 seconds, largely because of its many cutaways to library shots of jungle creatures. At the other extreme, several films were built out of abnormally long takes. John Stahl’s Back Street (1932) has an ASL of 19 seconds, while Otto Preminger’s Fallen Angel (1945) averages 33 seconds per shot. Through the 1950s, Preminger, Vincente Minnelli, and Billy Wilder continued to employ lengthy takes.

In the mid-1960s, several filmmakers began accelerating their cutting rates. Many A-films of the period contain ASLs of between 6 and 8 seconds, and some have significantly shorter averages. Goldfinger (1964), for example, clocks in at 4.0 seconds, Mickey One (1965) at 3.8 seconds, and Head (1968) at a remarkable 2.7 seconds. The pace accelerated in the 1970s.
Then, about three-quarters of films had ASLs between 5 and 8 seconds, and we find a significant number of still faster ones. As we'd expect, action films tended to be edited more briskly than other types (and Sam Peckinpah's seem to have been cut fastest of all), but musicals, dramas, romances, and comedies didn't necessarily favor long takes. *The Candidate* (1972), *Slaughterhouse-Five* (1972), *Pete's Dragon* (1977), *Freaky Friday* (1977), *National Lampoon's Animal House* (1978), *Foul Play* (1978), and *Hair* (1979) all have ASLs in the 4-to-5-second range. Midway through the decade, most films in any genre included at least a thousand shots.

In the 1980s the tempo continued to pick up, but the filmmaker's range of choice narrowed dramatically. Double-digit ASLs, still found during the 1970s, virtually vanished from mass-entertainment cinema. Most mainstream films had ASLs of between 5 and 7 seconds, and, again, many films averaged between 4 and 5 seconds—not only action films like *Raiders of the Lost Ark* and *Lethal Weapon* (1987) but also dramas (*Stand by Me* and *The Right Stuff*, both 1983; *Amadeus*, 1984; *The Breakfast Club*, 1985). We also find more films with ASLs in the 3-to-4-second range. Most were action pictures or movies influenced by music videos, such as *Road Warrior* (1981), *Pink Floyd: The Wall* (1982), *Tron* (1982), *WarGames* (1983), *Streets of Fire* (1984), *Highlander* (1986), *Top Gun* (1986), *Near Dark* (1987), *Alien Nation* (1988), and *Black Rain* (1989).

At the close of the 1980s, many films boasted 1,500 shots or more. There soon followed movies containing two to three thousand shots, such as *JFK* (1991) and *The Last Boy Scout* (1991). *El Mariachi* (1993), the low-budget breakout by Robert Rodriguez, contains nearly 2,100 shots; *Demolition Man* from the same year has nearly 2,600. Soon the three-to-four-thousand-shot movie arrived (*Braveheart*, 1995; *Nixon*, 1995; *Armageddon*, 1998; *Any Given Sunday*, 1999). Several directors began pushing the ASL below 3 seconds. *The Crow* (1994), *U-Turn* (1997), and *Sleepy Hollow* (1999) come in at 2.7 seconds; *El Mariachi, Armageddon*, and *South Park* (1999) at 2.3 seconds. By century's end, the ASL of a typical film in any genre would run 3 to 6 seconds.

Today, films are on average cut more rapidly than at any other time in U.S. studio filmmaking. Some films flirt with shot lengths reminiscent of late 1920s Soviet silent montage. Between 1961 and 1999, I can find only one film with an ASL of less than 2 seconds (*Dark City*, 1998, 1.8 seconds), but in the 2000s there's at least one every year (e.g., *Moulin Rouge* and *Requiem for a Dream*, 2001; *Pirates of the Caribbean*, 2003). Although action films tend to be cut at a scorching tempo, fast cutting governs all genres.

Although I know of no film averaging less than 1.5 seconds per shot, the weight of the norm has clearly shifted downward over the last four decades. A 6-to-7-second ASL, as in *The Others* (2001) and *Lost in Translation* (2003), now looks sedate, while only art movies like *13 Conversations about One Thing* (2001) and *Solaris* (2002) risk a 10-to-11-second average. Directors like Roman Polanski and Mike Nichols, who once favored exceptionally long takes, have joined the trend. Nichols has explained that the prolonged shot "began to seem to me more self-regarding, and cutting (and cutting a lot) began to excite me and began to give me the pleasures that most directors have right away." Only Woody Allen and M. Night Shyamalan have consistently chosen to build movies out of extended shots.

The quickening of editing has affected other techniques. While studio directors avoided cutting in the middle of a camera movement, today’s filmmakers feel no hesitation. In the old days, the spots at which the camera started and stopped were as significant as the movement itself, but now tracks and pans are usually interrupted by cuts, denying us a sense of a steady progression toward a revelation. As if fast cutting weren’t enough, filmmakers can create a percussive burst of images in other ways. Vehicles whiz through the foreground, breaking our line of sight. Whiplash pans and jerky reframings present two glimpses linked by a blur. Rack focusing (changing focus between foreground and background) can shift a shot’s composition as crisply as a cut can. Directors not only cut on bursts of light, like flashbulbs or headlights; pulsations within a shot, yielded by disco strobes or cracks of lightning, can seem to boost the editing rate as well. These other techniques, filmmakers seem to believe, help the cutting to impart “energy,” refreshing the screen, maintaining interest, building excitement.

Has rapid cutting therefore led to a “postclassical” breakdown of spatial continuity? Certainly, some action sequences are cut so fast (and staged so gracelessly) as to be incomprehensible. Todd McCarthy remarks that in *Armageddon* "director [Michael] Bay’s visual presentation is so frantic and chaotic that one often can’t tell which ship or characters are being shown, or where things are in relation to one another.” Nonetheless, many fast-
cut sequences do remain spatially coherent, as in the *Die Hard*, *Speed*, and *Lethal Weapon* franchises. The illegibility of some action scenes, I’ll suggest later, is partly traceable to misjudging what will read well on the big screen. More important, no film is ever one long action sequence. Most scenes present conversations, and here fast cutting is applied principally to shot/reverse-shot exchanges. How else could *Ordinary People* (1980) attain an ASL of 6.1 seconds, *Ghost* (1991) one of 5.0 seconds, *Almost Famous* (2000) one of 3.9 seconds, *Barbershop* (2002) one of 2.9 seconds, and *Runaway Jury* (2003) one of 2.0 seconds? Today’s editors tend to cut at every line, sometimes in the middle of a line, and they insert more reaction shots than we would find in movies from the classic studio years.

By building dialogue scenes out of brief shots, the new style has become somewhat more elliptical, using fewer establishing shots and sustained two-shots. As Lev Kuleshov, V. I. Pudovkin, and other Soviet montage directors realized, classical continuity contains redundancies: shot/reverse-shot exchanges reiterate the information about character placement given in the establishing shot, as do eyelines and body orientation. For the sake of intensifying the dialogue exchange, filmmakers have omitted some of the redundancies provided by establishing shots. At the same time, though, fast-cut dialogue has reinforced certain premises of the 180-degree staging system. When every shot is short, when establishing shots are brief or postponed or nonexistent, the eyelines and angles in a dialogue need to be even more unambiguous, and the axis of action is likely to be respected quite strictly.