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Match Frame and Jump Cut

A dialectic theory of montage in the digital age

No life can be long enough to see every audio-visual pro-
duction realised. If the ideology of *cinéphilie* was to watch
any film of any style of any period, it has to be qualified as a
historical movement and nothing more. Today, the academic
on the one hand and the *téléphile* on the other have replaced
the *cinéphile*. The first has a very specialized historical know-
ledge that ends, where the knowledge of the latter begins. In
other words, the combining point of vision is not practicable
any more. A film will be forgotten most quickly after its cine-
ma exploitation to be found again as a déjà-vu in television.
Later, in video exploitation, it will provoke a reaction of "hey-
this-is-cool-this-is-cool". And than it will be forgotten in the
graveyards of archivation, in company archives, collector
archives and, finally, official archives.

In this situation, cinema is experiencing a process of canoni-
zation. The canon is not based on the success of a film, as
cult movies or great classics used to do (who will, of course,
still continue to exist), but on university work cinema has
become a matter of historical research like other bourgeois
arts as literature, the fine arts, music and the performing
arts. Television, video exploitation, computer games, video
art and internet movies are considered to be daughters of
cinema and in the consequence are mostly treated apart.
Even if this division is problematic, it can be justified with the
different intentions of those media. While cinema is looking
for the specific experience, the orgasmic event, so to say,
television has the role of the collective subconscious, video
exploitation and computer games of collective phantasms,
video art of repression and internet movies, until now, of
refreshments or appetisers (and are in that sense rather
much comparable to the function of advertising and clips).

But cinema itself seems to change these days. All media
mentioned have their influence on it. To keep its exposed
position, cinema is forced to adapt any invention in the
technical and aesthetic field. The speed of this development

and the change of technology in almost any domain of cinema provokes the question, whether "cinema", as a synthetic term, does not loose its sense. Can it still be considered as one medium? Does the digital technology not replace cinema? Is the final acceptance in the academic world not just once more a proof for the presume, that theory comes, when the phenomenon already has appeared, i.e. when things are over?

If we consider cinema to be a principle much more than a medium, these questions seem less crucial. We do not have to be concerned about a change of the form of projection or the form of production. For the aesthetic reflection is only interesting, what can be seen on the screen. Not even the size of the projected image makes any difference. A movie, small like a stamp, differs of course from another, big like a tennis field. To figure that out, it does not need much capacity of theoretical analysis. But even if the panoramic shot does not work in the small format and if the close-up might function badly in the big one, the basic language of moving images stays the same.
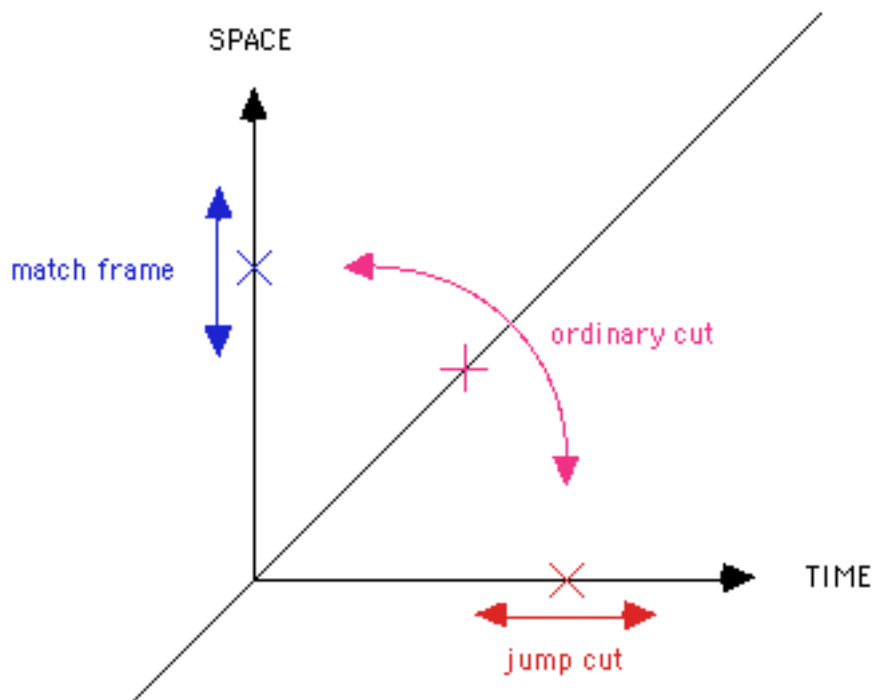
A theory of montage has to start from the idea, that there is a common principle for any audio-visual production: a shot is a shot, a cut a cut. Only, the changing of the technical disposition can change the implication of a take. The effect of a cadre, a tracking or a dissolve can have a completely different subtext than it would have under other technical conditions. In other words: The means stay the same, but the context is giving them a different signification. The new technology, therefore, is not causing the changing of the audio-visual expression. It is on the contrary necessary to keep the old forms of montage going!

This remark must be left in its paradoxical beauty for the moment. I will discuss it later. First, we have to find a general theoretical approach, that allows to define the relations of the images for any audio-visual product, i.e. for a montage beyond specific codes. Two terms are of great help for such an effort. They mark extremes that have always been present as regional preferences as well as commercial arguments (classical Hollywood against Russian film, for example, or blockbusters against independents). Both had a historical impulse on the development of cinema. The first

half of the 20th century has been essentially impregnated by the *match frame*, while the second was largely influenced by the *jump cut*. Before discussing the historical value and respectively the changing of the cinematographic expression, a precise definition of these terms is necessary.

Definition of terms

Match frame and jump cut are to be considered as direct opposites. They are the two possible basic forms, a cut ever can have. An ordinary cut – and any cut is ordinary except of match frame and jump cut – can be described as a mixture of them. The two terms allow to describe the audio-visual language with regard to the principles of space and time, the latter being of exorbitant importance for montage. *The match frame is a cut in space, but not in time. The jump cut is a cut in time, but not in space.*

I. DIAGRAM: traditional montage

Match frame and jump cut have very specific significations in the technical language of filmmaking. A match frame in its pure form is the combination of two takes, showing completely different places. They are forced into a correlation by the movement of a person, who is passing from one take to the

other, continuing exactly the same action. The interest focuses on the acting person, while the space is only important in relation to it. Even if the abrupt changing of the places will create an effect of poetry or humour, the match frame shows clearly, that the cinematographic interest does not lie in the representation of the spatial world, but in the presentation of somebody acting.

The jump cut, on the contrary, sets the place above the action. By cutting out a part of the temporal continuity of a take, the acting person is found again in a different position in the same cadre. This jumping of the person does not correspond to a rational explanation. The pure form of the jump cut does not necessarily signify a lap of time. It stands for a static vision of the world. The person is thrown into a space, which is extraneous to it. Its movement does not make any sense. It is absurd, contradicted by a space that cannot be changed by action anyway.

Match frame and jump cut, however, do not appear very often in their pure forms. But matching and jumping can be considered as general principles of editing. Any cut in space is a match frame. Two different takes of the same room, let it be a shot – reverse-shot, demand the same competence of abstraction from the spectator than two completely different places, showing for instance an inside and an outside, night and day, sun and rain or whatsoever. Only the difference is more evident for the latter. The classical scheme of a film is the lost of unity of the hero with the world. He has to get over different obstacles, until he finds (or in the tragic genre finds never ever) again the unity. This fight is presented as an inner struggle, even if we can only see the outer confrontations. The spatial surroundings become in the matching tradition in some way the illustration of the person's inner state. (It will rain, when people are sad, sun will shine, when people are happy and not the other way round – people are not happy, because the sun shines.)

Any cut in time is a jump cut. Its task in a narration is the cutting out of a piece of action. Temporal discontinuity, therefore, is based on the jumping mode of expression. But the time-lap does not necessarily have to resemble a jump. The absurd aspect of the jump cut is replaced by an elliptic function. The ellipse is probably the most important invention

for editing, because without it, real time and represented time would be the same, i.e. no complex cinematographic structure would be possible. Potentially, any cut represents a small lap of time. The matching rules permit to forget the stagnation of cutting; the narrative norms help to understand temporal differences. How much the understanding of the cut as a lap, however, goes, becomes obvious remembering the refusal to cut between a gun shot and its result, as Arthur Penn and Dede Allen have practised it in *Bonnie and Clyde*. The new representation of violence since has a lot to do with the vision of a cut as non-realistic. (André Bazin is discussing this idea on a less spectacular matter. He takes two children films as examples to prove the paradoxical fact that to make the spectator believe in the simultaneity of a fiction, knowing that it is a fake, the cinematographic representation has to respect the spatial-continuous reality. A cut could, therefore, be prohibited. Montage, he says, being the essence of cinema, can become an anti-cinematographic and purely literary element. André Bazin. *Montage interdit*. In: *Qu'est-ce que le cinéma?* Paris 1994 [1975]. His conception of the plan-séquence as an assurance of realism is another example for his critical reception of the cut as elliptic and artificial.)

Historical Survey

It took about 20 years, before spectators and makers mastered completely the matching method – being a highly abstract form of language. The evolution of montage is often explained with the enlargement of the spatial concept of cinema. The cut, representing at first the curtain, which is closed between the changing of acts, was more and more used to separate action, to get directly into a scene, as we know it today, and to combine the different perspectives of the same situation. All the codes had to be invented, as the eye lines, the rule 180º; (prohibiting the camera to pass freely from one side of an actor to the other, to guaranty the continuity of action, because otherwise the actor would run from left to right in the first and from right to left in the next take), the different focal lengths, the insert, the flashback construction and so forth. (See, for instance, David Bordwell, Janet Staiger, and Kristin Thompson. *The classical Hollywood Cinema. Film Style and Mode of Production to 1960.* London

1994 [1985].) Once mastered, the matching became norm. Any other form was excluded from the rules of cutting.

The jump cut, being a non-continual principle, could not be at the origin of a narrative system. To incorporate it into the matching system, as it is true for the pure form of the match frame, any aspect, which could not be explained rationally by the spectator, was suppressed. If the jump cut did not indicate time passing, it was considered to be a mistake, with only one exception: Its non-rational effect was used for the production of fantastic situations, suggesting the metamorphose of something or somebody. To ensure the success, the person or object had to be in the same position as the one, it was changing into. The place staying the same, the jump cut gave the impression of the transformation of the person or object. This aspect of the jump cut, that is usually called stoptrick, predeceased the curtain-cut (Georges Méliès used it a lot to create his miraculous effects) and reveals from the very beginning the manipulating nature of the cut in general.

The match frame, however, as the leading figure of classical cinema, helps to find the secrete impulse of audio-visual narration until the 60s. The interest for the acting person instead of the spatial surroundings, the vision of the world as the reflection of an inner state of the hero show, that the classical film with its anthropocentrical conception of the world finds its roots in a romantic and surrealistic motivation. The romantic influence is the prerequisite for the technical evolution of montage. The importance of this influence has been seen right from the start by D.W. Griffith, who was inspired by Charles Dickens for the invention of the insert from his description of details, that become revealing for the heroes characterisation. (See Sergej M. Eisenstein. Dickens, Griffith and we (1942). In: *Gesammelte Aufsätze I.* German translation from Lothar Fahlbusch. Zurich without year. Eisenstein cannot accept the matching method, because he is looking for a metaphorical montage. His idea of the collision-cut, therefore, must be based on the jump cut.) The surrealists, on the other hand, saw in the slapstick tradition a realisation of their aims. It is characteristic, that they identified with matching, because it is surrealistic method, on the contrary to the dadaistic approach – where a collage presented reality fragments – to show a unity, giving the impression of a fictional whole, which was highly inspired by the modern
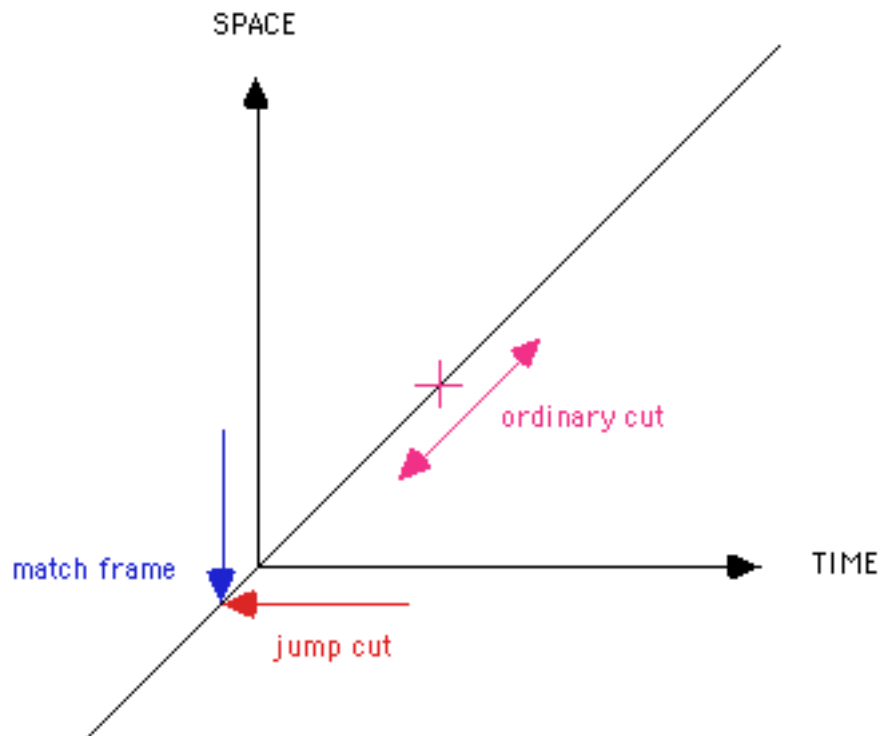
conception of dreams (presenting a collage of impressions based on one single imaginary, not on the multiplicity of reality). Surrealism is the practice of the invisible cut, classical cinema has always searched for. It does hardly surprise – the matching being of such an importance for the American tradition – that the American founder of experimental cinema, Maya Deren, has been working with the match frame, while the European early experimental cinema, coming out of a dadaistic tradition, was much more attracted by the jump cut, as the films of René Clair, Hans Richter or even Louis Buñuel prove.)

The revenge of the jump cut in the 60s is an expression of the commercial and conceptual crisis of cinema, whose matching methods were getting out of fashion. Since the 50s, the importance of television was growing. It was revolutionising the audio-visual forms, becoming quickly a live medium, which combined the function of radio with the attraction of cinema. Television was presenting anything on the same level, without caring for narrative continuity. It was jumping from one theme to the other, from one style to the next, from one image to the following. It was the final witness for the alienation of the world that could not be seen any more as an expression of the hero's emotion, but only as the Other, the Foreign, the Unconscious. The cinema was confronted with this new concurrence that was an expression of reality as a heterogeneous simultaneity and on top of that tended to absorb the films. In that situation, cinema only had two choices. Either, it would push the great emotion, the bigger-than-life, the dream even wider, or it had to reflect the idea of heterogeneity, multiplicity and estrangement. The first reaction led to the invention of cinemascope, a larger screen format, which allows impressive panoramics and ensembles, denying the detail and the explicit fragmentation of reality. The latter reinvented the jump cut. Its refusal of any matching was the apt form to express the vision of the surroundings as extraneous, the movements as senseless and the world not as a continual process, but a simultaneous state. It was the time of pop art, whose cinematographic variant usually is called New Wave.

If the victory of the jump cut was connected with the rise of television, it depended in the same way on a new technology that was getting important in the 60s. The 16 mm equipment

led to a dilettantisation, so to say, of production mode and style of moving images. The handhold camera, for example, became accepted in documentaries at first as well as a more independent treatment of sound. The invention of 8 mm, Super-8 mm and finally video technology was the next step, but those media did not play an important part for greater productions. Amateurs and experimentalists in the beginning only adapted them. Parallel to this technical process, the music clip production was developing. Its spreading was accompanying any technical invention. Getting commercially influential, the clip production started to dictate its own style. The echo can be found in any medium. Based on rhythmic montage intentions, the rule system of narrative continuity had no influence any more on the editing.

And there, something strange happens. While the jump cut continues to be present in the clip montages, the match frame is resuscitating not in its conventionalised variant, but in its pure form: The singers change costumes and places all the time though they continue their singing and dancing. For the first time in the history of moving images, we find a peaceful coexistence of match frame and jump cut. The two main directions of audio-visual language, the surrealistic-romantic matching and the existentialistic-deconstructive jumping have been replaced by a third way. This new style is non-rationalist and intuitive. Space and time cannot be thought as two isolated principles any more. They represent a new unity. Let's call this renewal montage of relativity.

SPACE

ordinary cut

match frame

TIME

jump cut

II. DIAGRAM: digital montage

Montage of relativity

The digital editing has changed the relation of the cutter and his material. While a cut on a traditional table is a rational decision in the sense, that the film reel has to be stopped at the right place, a white line to be drawn, where the cut is meant to be, and the cut finally to be actually executed, the cut in digital editing is set less carefully. In a way, the practice of cutting tends to be replaced by *trimming*. This function allows to add or subtract frames of the last or the next take by clicking on a left or right button until the cut works out. Trimming is a method of try and error. Its result is much more a matter of taste than of norm. The trim is following its own principles. When a cut looks good, it is good. But this anything goes of editing (which must not be mixed up with the practice of jump cutting, being a conceptual editing method that sets the principle above the beauty) does not necessarily signify, that a cut cannot be judged any more as good or bad, breathtaking or vulgar. There still is a difference between trimming and zapping. Even if trimming is a method of try and error, even if it is a process of elimi-

nating worse solutions, the result is never a haphazard. Behind every trim is a decision *for* something that can be called positive and definitive. This is not the case for zapping. A trim, therefore, can be considered as the direct opposite of a zap, which is always a decision *against* something.

The impulse of trimming on the editing style, however, lies in the fact, that the searched solution would be the one of least resistance, i.e. resistance against the spectator. In other words, the more the material is getting heterogeneous and not classically storyboarded, the more it becomes important, that the montage appears smooth and homogeneous. The invisible cut has finally imposed itself over the collision-cut, ironically just in the very moment, where the method of collision has commercially become accepted. Connected to the invisible cut is the phenomenon of the dissolve. It had become quite unpopular since the 60s, being the weakened form of the jump cut and therefore disregarded. Its traditional tasks, the signification of a passage of time or of a remembrance of the past (before and after a flashback), had become dull and banal. But all of a sudden the dissolve is experiencing a renaissance and becomes omnipresent. During the 90s, its functions have been partly replaced, partly enlarged. Its original role as a kind of soft jump cut has been tempered. Its too clearly defined tasks have been enlarged and any concrete explication has been taken away. From now on, the dissolve can be used whenever it seems practical. It becomes the preferred form of editing, because it liquidates the montage and seems the perfect realisation of the invisible cut.

But its role is not limited to make certain the flow of images. It can be used the other way round as well. With their passage from traditional to digital editing table (AVID), i.e. from *Casino* on, Martin Scorsese and Thelma Schoonmaker use the dissolve quite often as a smooth variant of the pure form of the jump cut. The dissolve within a take, fading, for instance, from a panoramic over a wall to the same panoramic or a similar take, does not have a logical signification. There might be the function of a certain distance taking to the narrated story and of a purely cinematographical approach. But in the end, the dissolve is not understandable. Undermining a cinematographical convention, the digital

montage gives new importance to an element, which had become out-of-mode.

Now it becomes evident, why the digital is keeping the old forms of montage going, as I said above. The new technology has freed them from a very specific task, changed their cinematographic subtext and given them, because of the different context, a different connotation. We can reject the question, whether the digital technology replaces cinema. But changing the code of cinematographic forms, it modifies cinema, of course. When I asked, whether the academic acceptance was a sign for the end of cinema, we can now answer, that it is an indication for the end of a certain idea of cinema. I therefore started this text mentioning the cinéphilie. But the missing of cinéphilie is a problem, because it stands for the missing of a capacity of judgement. The enthusiasm for a tracking, a plan-séquence, a close-up, a deep-focus-photography seems hardly understandable our days and it is only very partly replaced by a contemporary enthusiasm for digital effects that become used up very quickly (as the developing of morphing shows, for instance. Again, however, this variant of the stoptrick testifies for the desire of liquidity as the main characteristic of digital cutting). In a way, the contemporary situation is the inverse of the past. It is not the masterly performance that become significant for quality (as a long tracking, a great plan-séquence, a magnificent close-up or a splendid deep-focus), but the mastery of non-performance. The danger of the digital anything goes (be it practical or theoretical) is the using of anything possible. By doing so, the montages tends to resemble slide shows with moving pictures, having no inner connection, but good design, or to fall back to a classical form, which is not free of restorative aspects and therefore not a solution. To make good films, *cinematographical thinking* is necessary. Finding that again by using the digital technology will be a good way for audio-visual production.

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