Invisible Storytelling

The main purpose of a mainstream Hollywood film is to tell you, the viewer, a story. All mainstream films are based around a plot or narrative idea and contain various scenes and sequences which combine to form the overall story. On a more fundamental level, all films can be boiled down to just two core building blocks: the shot and the cut.

As such, the use of camera and editing are crucial elements of moving image language.

As cinema first evolved in the early 20th century, a particular style of shooting and editing geared towards making film narratives easier to grasp developed. This became known as the ‘continuity style’. From the very outset it proved popular with both filmmakers and audiences, offering both an almost intuitively shared grammar. The continuity style has since become the moving image’s most conventional and dominant mode of visual storytelling.

The most important aspect of this particular style is that it encourages you, the viewer, to become enthralled and captivated by a story but actively discourages you from consciously noticing the editing and camera techniques that are being used to tell it.

The continuity style deliberately sets out to make the camera, camerawork and editing invisible or, at the very least, unobtrusive. The events on screen seem to take place within a world of their own. They appear to have been simply captured by some kind of unseen observer, who just happened to be watching and recording the action from convenient and suitable positions or angles.

This is the key to the continuity style: its ability to tell a story whilst at the same time hiding the storytelling mechanisms themselves. You, the audience member, are drawn in to the narrative. You feel as if you are seeing the story unfolding on screen. The techniques are deliberately used in order to effect precisely the right emotional response in you at precisely the right moment. The result is seamless and engaging storytelling and, in the hands of truly gifted filmmakers, this technique can really make us feel as if we are actually participating in the events on screen.

In concert with the rise of the continuity style, filmmakers developed formal methods which made shooting relatively quick and easy. These rules are applicable to any moving image production:

- Shoot whichever scenes are most economical to shoot at a given time (shooting out of sequence when necessary). In Independence Day (1996), the final scenes of our heroes landing safely after vanquishing the invading Alien armada were filmed first. This allowed filming to begin while other, more expensive sets and set pieces were being built and devised.
Realism: Classical Hollywood Style

- Cover any given sequence from as many different angles as possible, either by re-filming takes from new camera positions or, if multiple cameras are available, by filming each take from several angles simultaneously. Generating enough ‘coverage’ means that the director’s editorial options are vastly increased.
- Edit the material to create linear continuity, cutting on movement and keeping eyelines matched.

Once these basic methods of shooting and editing a film became institutionalised in the early 20th century, it was easy to continue adhering to this style.

The basic components of the Classical Hollywood style are:

- Narrative flow is pieced together out of small fragments of action so that the action appears continuous and the joins are rendered invisible.
- Sequences that occur simultaneously but in different locations are intercut to generate narrative tension.
- Dialogue sequences are constructed by cutting between a series of over-the-shoulder shots which place us within the general eyeline of whichever participant is speaking.
- The gaze of the viewer is wedded to the gaze of the main characters. When we see a character looking at something off-camera and then cut to the object of their gaze, we understand what the character is looking at.

*Film Art* by David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson (2001) contains a detailed discussion of continuity editing (p. 262–278), as does Robert P. Kolker’s essay ‘The Film Text and Film Form’ in *The Oxford Guide to Film Studies* (1998). Perhaps the best way of illustrating the power of the technique is to look at the two clips suggested below, both of which show how continuity style can convey complex information without recourse to dialogue.

### Rear Window (1954), 00:01:28 – 00:03:51
This influential film from Alfred Hitchcock can be used to illustrate many aspects of the continuity style. This opening scene is an excellent example of how film can relay expository information to us wordlessly. Simply by moving the camera across the set and using strategically placed props (the plaster cast, the broken camera, the framed photographs, the magazine cover), we learn that the lead character is a photographer who has injured himself on a dangerous assignment and that he is romantically involved with a beautiful woman.

### The Hudsucker Proxy (1994), 00:03:42 – 00:06:52
In this dialogue-free sequence a young man arrives in 1950s New York looking for work.