The Elements of Cinema

Editing is the selection and ordering of shots to create a narrative structure that communicates ideas, feelings or attitudes.

"Cinema" (any format of motion picture, including video) is a chain of visual impressions running and interlocking in an uninterruptible succession of graphic bombardments. The laws of expression for conveying an idea in visual terms - its syntax - are unlike the ones we use to organize ideas in the verbal mode; the whole matrix differs. The clarity and force of a visual statement depends on the filmmaker's understanding of how to organize significant form into cinesthetic elements so that the result is a dynamic flow of screen information.

Basic Models of Structure

Steffan Sharff, in The Elements of Cinema, has identified eight basic models of structure:

1. **Separation**: Fragmentation of a scene into single images in alternation - A, B, A, B, A, B. Showing two people who are close together in separate shots. A conversation is going on with one person looking right in a MS and the other person looking left in a CU (usually after a two shot establishes that the two people are close to each other). This technique brings us closer to each person than we could be if both are shown in the same shot; it places the viewer as a third person in the conversation.

2. **Parallel Action**: Two or more narrative lines (stories or scenes) running simultaneously and presented by alternation between scenes. This is created by cross-cutting, which gives the viewer the illusion of being in two or more places at the same time. This enables the filmmaker to extend or condense time and creates a 'screen time' with a logic of its own.

3. **Slow Disclosure**: The gradual introduction of pictorial information within a single shot, or several shots. A shot starting with a CU that does not reveal the location of the subject at first. It then pulls back or cuts to a full revelation of the location, which surprises the viewer.

4. **Familiar Image**: A stabilizing anchor image periodically reintroduced without variation. A landscape, an object or activity that repeats itself with little change during a film. The repetition has a subliminal effect, creating a visual abstract throught. It can be used as a stabilizing bridge to new action.
and to assumes meaning as the film progresses.

5. **MOVING CAMERA:** Used without cuts and from a camera mounted on a dolly, crane or steadicam. These are used to follow action as the subject moves through a location or to disclose new visual information (see Slow Disclosure).

6. **MULTI-ANGULARITY:** A series of shots of contrasting angles and compositions (including reverse and mirror images).

7. **MASTER SHOT DISCIPLINE:** A single shot of an entire dramatic action. A *traditional Hollywood film structure*, i.e., an establishing shot, used as a "cover" for the entire scene. For example, a conversation is taped in its entirety as a two shot; then it is reshot in pieces from different distances and angles needed to construct the scene. These pieces are intercut with the master shot, so that the viewer frequently returns to the same original angle, almost as a familiar image. This is often accomplished by doing a multi-camera shoot. One camera covers the two-shot as master, the two other cameras cover the medium, over-the-shoulder shots. Since the action is recorded only once but from three angles, it is always consistent - there will be no continuity problems.

8. **ORCHESTRATION:** The arrangement of the cinematic chain of shots and scenes throughout the film that keeps the momentum flowing. Shots and scenes are interdependent in that they effect one another and influence what comes after as well as explain what has gone before. Orchestration harmonizes the cinematic continuum. Orchestration's initial purpose is to present the basic iconography of the film, to acquaint the viewer with its "way of speaking", its "voice", the cinesthetic method of the film.

"Out of this chaotic mass of images, the filmmaker, with either a stationary or moving camera, captures shots selectively, framing them in a variety of graphic compositions and assigns them each a given time on the screen. The evolution of a cinema syntax made possible increasingly complex combinations of shots, which could then generate an even greater variety of messages and meanings." *(The Elements of Cinema: Toward a Theory of Cinesthetic Impact, Stefan Sharff, Columbia Press, 1982)*

**A good film "phrase" contains a minimum of three shots.** Two shots hint at and create expectation about the development of the narrative; the third well-chosen shot will resolve those expectations. Like notes in music, two notes together don't reveal the tune, but with the addition of at least one more note, it is often possible to tell what the tune is. Two pictures can tell many possible stories, but the addition of a third is necessary to complete the
phrase. This hints at the parallels between cinematic elements and the musical elements of tonality, harmony and rhythm. A shot sequence seems to require a threesome that gives the phrase a sort of melodic wholeness. (from Sharff)

"Much like their verbal counterparts, cinematic sentences reveal information gradually, shot after shot, while elements of structure, ordering the words of the sentence according to the characteristic time-space values, create on the screen a composite view of a world of cinematic illusion. (Sharff)

"The screen is the message and therefore the concept of the screen is paramount in theoretical considerations of cinema; it is the final "stage" on which occur the 'graphic bombardments of the cinematic illusion' and in the context the notion of the cinema becomes secondary . . . The most important principle in attaining a higher level of expression is that the group of images so organized should generate more meaning than the sum of the information contained in each shot." (Sharff)