

HOW FILMMAKERS MANIPULATE TIME

Narratives rarely elapse in real time. Films may run for ninety minutes, but its story might span days, weeks or decades. This article explores the tips and techniques every filmmaker should know for manipulating time

LINEAR NARRATIVES

The most conventional way to structure time is using a linear narrative which shows events unfolding in order. Linear starts at the beginning, moves to the middle, and ends at the end.

Even in linear narratives, however, directors often omit events to move the story forward. We might cut, for example, from our character sitting at their desk to a shot of them leaving class later that day. The audience understands that time has passed, and the transition is nearly invisible.

Establishing shots are often used to signify a change in time or place. In many ways, they're the glue that holds a narrative together and enable filmmakers to leave out large chunks of time. Imagine our main character sitting down to breakfast. We cut to an establishing shot of a school building, then to a shot of the same character sitting at a desk. The audience understands that time has passed and it isn't necessary to show all of the action.

NON-LINEAR NARRATIVES

Narratives don't have to be linear. Techniques such as **flashback** and **flash forward** can be used to develop your story in engaging and interesting ways. Flashbacks are momentary cuts to past events which may consist of a single shot or entire scenes. Many films include flashbacks, including **Citizen Kane** and **The Dark Knight Rises**. Flash forwards, which reveal events that will happen in the future, are less frequent.

At the end of *The Dark Knight*, Christopher Nolan uses flash forwards to help resolve the narrative. Retrospective narratives begin in the present, cutting back to previous events for most of the narrative.

A great example of flashback is from the film, **Shutter Island**.

MONTAGE

View the first 8 minutes of **Soviet Theory of Montage** (8:34)

A montage is sequence of individual shots which, when edited together, show the progression of time. One of the most famous examples is **Rocky** when Rocky Balboa is training to take on the world heavyweight champion.

In **Batman Begins**, Bruce Wayne (Christian Bale) becomes a ninja in the space of four minutes.

In **Army of Darkness**, Ash (Bruce Campbell) prepares to fend off a horde of marauding zombies in just a few minutes.

Montage is the short, quick way to show information that would otherwise take a long time –training, failure, success, falling in love, makeovers and travel.

FAST MOTION

Speeding up footage can be an effective way to show the progression of time.

In **Limitless**, **Eddie Morra** (Bradley Cooper) is a frustrated writer who discovers a drug that unlocks the unused portions of his brain, allowing him to complete a novel overnight.

Although fast motion can be used to manipulate time, be aware that it's used often for special effects or comedy.

In **Aliens**, James Cameron uses fast motion during Bishop's game of five finger fillet.

In **Gladiator**, Ridley Scott speeds up the movement of tigers in the arena. Thanks to **Keystone Cops** and **Benny Hill**, audiences largely perceive fast motion as a comedic technique.

TIME-LAPSE

Time-lapse is another technique that students can use to manipulate time. It seems to be used most often in establishing shots to convey the passing of time. **127 Hours** features numerous time lapse shots of the desert landscape.

In **Zodiac**, **David Fincher** uses time-lapse, with a little help from CGI, condensing the construction of the Transamerica Pyramid into mere seconds.

If you want to create you own time-lapse footage, many DSLRs come with a built-in intervalometers making the process much easier. There are also a number of apps for iOS and Android.

SLOW-MOTION

Slow motion is traditionally used create suspense and increase the drama of scenes. One of the traditional issues with filming slow motion is frame rate. Slowing down video footage shot at 25 or 30 frames per second usually results in jerky footage. Editing software like **Adobe Premiere Pro** and **Final Cut** is capable of reducing this but it never looks fantastic. Some cameras,

including the GoPro, are capable of shooting at higher frame rates but at the moment we're still very much limited by technology.

JUMP CUTS

A jump cut occurs when two visually similar shots are edited together, creating a jarring jump from one to the next. Although jump cuts are usually considered a mistake, they can be used to show the progression of time by filming a sequence and cutting large chunks out of it. At the beginning of *Snatch*, director Guy Ritchie uses jump cuts to speed up a sequence showing a group of jewel thieves removing their disguises.

FREEZE FRAME ★ TABLEAU

A freeze frame (or tableau) is when the image pauses. This is often used, along with the sound of a camera, to simulate still photographs. Freeze frames are also used to signify the end of a narrative.

Good examples of this include ***The Breakfast Club*** and the *Matrix*. In ***Passion of the Christ*** momentary tableau is used to show grief in a stylised way.

FLASH FRAME

Flash frames are distinct from flashbacks because the audience is only given a brief, almost subliminal glimpse something. In many cases, this use of editing is highly subjective, providing the audience with a brief glimpse into the mind of a character.

SPLIT SCREEN

Split screen gives filmmakers the opportunity to divide the frame and is usually used to show simultaneous action. This technique was also used extensively in the television series *24* to show events unfolding at the same time. In *500 Days of Summer*, a split screen is used to show the difference between expectation and reality as Tom Hanson (Joseph Gordon Levitt) visits his former girlfriend.

PARALLEL EDITING

Parallel editing is used to show two events which are usually occurring simultaneously. In ***Misery***, director Rob Reiner uses parallel editing to show Paul Sheldon (James Caan) desperately trying to make it back to his room before the psychotic Annie Wilkes (Kathy Bates) discovers he has been exploring the house.

TIME-LAPSE

A smash cut is a sudden transition to another shot before it would normally end. In *American Beauty*, Sam Mendes smash cuts from a tranquil aerial shot of suburbia to an overshoot of Lester Burnham (Kevin Spacey) laying face down on his bed.

Edgar Wright uses smash cuts for stylistic effect in *Shaun of the Dead* and *Hot Fuzz* to create transitions between otherwise mundane scenes. In *Gran Torino*, Clint Eastwood smash cuts from a close up of a furious Walt Kowalski to the aftermath of the argument as he children burst from the house.

SPEED RAMPING

Speed ramping is when the speed of footage changes during a single shot. It is often used in fight scenes to increase the drama. A frenetic fight scene will often slow down as a punch connects only to speed back up in seconds. Director Zac Snyder uses speed ramping extensively in *300* during the **Battle of Thermopylae** when Spartan warriors clash with the invading Persian army.

Director Guy Ritchie also uses the effect during a boxing match in ***Sherlock Holmes***, when the title character plans how he will incapacitate his opponent.

SUPERIMPOSITION

Superimposing two or more shots on top of each other can be used to convey the passing of time. In *Zodiac*, director David Fincher superimposes footage of detectives and reporters investigating the Zodiac murders with newspaper headlines and letters from the killer, creating a montage spanning years.

WHIP PAN

While whip pans aren't exactly a way to structure time, they can be used to show a quick transition from one place to another. In *Scott Pilgrim vs The World*, director Edgar Wright makes extensive use of whip pans when Scott Pilgrim is searching for Romona Flowers at a party. "Dude," he says. "She's totally real!" Edgar Wright whip pans to another shot of him asking a friend what they know about her. Edgar Wright also makes extensive use of whip pans in *Shaun of the Dead* and *Hot Fuzz*.

WIPE BY CUT

Named by Verna Field, who used the technique when working on ***Jaws***, a wipe by cut is when someone passes in front of the camera, then cuts to a different shot as someone else finishes passing in front of the camera.

Putting a slight cross dissolve between these two shots means that the transition is almost imperceptible. In *Jaws*, Steven Spielberg and Verna Fields used wipe by cuts when Chief Brody (Roy Scheider) is watching people swimming at the beach.

AUDIO MATCH CUT

An audio match cut is when two similar sounds fade into each other. Director Alfred Hitchcock famously used an audio match cut in *39 Steps*, cutting from a shot of a woman screaming to the shot of a train blowing its whistle. In *Dead Calm*, director Philip Noyce uses an audio match cut, transitioning from the sound of a heartbeat to the sound of wiper blades. In Season 2 of *Breaking Bad* in an episode called 'Over', an audio match cut is used to transition between a shot of Walter White using a power tool at home, to a shot of a janitor using a vacuum at Skylar's office.

In addition to creating a smooth transition between two shots, audio match cuts can also signify there is a relationship between two scenes.