OUT OF ORDER

Storytelling Techniques for Video and Cinema Editors

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About the Author

Ross Hockrow is an acclaimed filmmaker, innovative educator, and published author. He has directed six feature-length films and several award-winning short films, the latest of which won the Audience Choice Award for the 2013 48-Hour Film Festival in Providence, Rhode Island, and Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

Hockrow's filmmaking abilities stretch beyond narratives and into commercial work for the Fortune 500 companies Skype and Expedia. He also directed a promotional piece featuring Bill Gates. An Adobe-sponsored speaker and editor, he pioneered live filmmaking education with his Get In Motion tour in 2011—the industry's first-ever educational workshop tour created exclusively for filmmakers.

Hockrow has lectured in more than 100 cities during three international tours, and he has taught platform classes at several major industry tradeshows, including NAB, CES, and WPPI. In 2014, he was selected to teach the first-ever filmmaking course on the CreativeLIVE online learning platform; the course attracted over 40,000 viewers. Hockrow's well-received first book, *Storytelling Techniques for Digital Filmmakers* (Amherst Media, 2013), led to a follow-up book on editing theory, which you now hold in your hands. He recently completed the Out of Order tour, dedicated to the Out of Order brand, which involves a feature film, this book, and continuing education.

Acknowledgments

A great deal of time, effort, and brain power went into writing this book. First, I want to say that five years ago I started a mission. I was a young, self-taught filmmaker who relied solely on my editing skills to be a good filmmaker. When I started out, editing was really the only thing I could control from a budgetary standpoint because it was just my brain and the computer. Camera and lenses didn't matter once the footage was shot. Needless to say, I was a terrible director when I first started out, but I saved many projects with editing. As I improved as a director, I realized how much editing really shaped who I was as a filmmaker. I worked backwards. I became a great editor first, and then slowly worked my way backwards to an understanding of filmmaking after seeing the elements I needed on the editing board. Eventually, it all clicked.

Clay Blackmore and Jeff Medford offered my first opportunity to teach editing. In my first tour of teaching photographers this new DSLR technology, I realized everyone was very scared of editing. I didn't understand why at first, and then I perceived a massive misunderstanding of editing. Because I was teaching photographers to be filmmakers, their natural assumption was that editing film was equivalent to using Photoshop to fine-tune images. But those two things couldn't be more different. I made it my mission to make people see what editing really is and understand that it is controlled by the brain via the choices you make while editing.

I can honestly say that I have accomplished that mission after three nationwide tours, a CreativeLive appearance, and many conventions and master classes. None of that really compares to this book, however. This book is part of a brand dubbed Out of Order, which includes the movie that comes with the book and a tour (which, sorry, already happened). This book is everything I believe editors need to focus on. For some, it represents an adjustment to the way they think. It's a little bit like finding out the world is round when for so long you *knew* it was flat. Don't worry, you'll get used to it.

This book would not have been possible without the people around me helping me do this. The first person I want to thank is Corbin Collins. It's funny because we've never met in person, but he was assigned to be the editor for this book. When I submitted the first chapter to him and he told me to rewrite it, I felt like a 22-year-old punk all over again (although it wasn't that long ago—I'm now 28). I said to myself, "What does this guy know?" Then I reread his notes and realized, "This is the guy who is going to make this a book." Not me. I just know things. Articulating those things into coherent sentences so that people can actually understand what I'm saying is a skill, and I didn't realize how hard it is. I started out in this business as a scriptwriter, but writing a book is a totally different animal. Corbin pushed me to the limit with

every word, sentence, and description, and this book is just as much his as it is mine. Without him, no one would understand what I'm actually saying.

Secondly, I want to thank Karyn Johnson for giving me the opportunity to write this book. As hard as it was, it was a pleasure, and without Karyn none of this would have ever happened. Karyn could have selected any one of several filmmakers, and even more teachers, out there. But she chose me. I hope this book reassures that choice. And thanks to Kelly Kordes Anton, our copyeditor, who fixed and polished the final product.

Next, I want to thank Jeff Medford and Clay Blackmore for finding me in in the University of Delaware library (illegally). I was editing low-budget rap videos, and they gave me the opportunity to actually make a living being a filmmaker. As I sit in my new house, only two days old, I can't help but think that without those guys I'd still be sneaking into the U of D library and editing videos for $100. I will forever be in their debt.

I want to dedicate this book to my dog Cleveland. Really? Am I going there? Yes, but hear me out. Nine years ago, after playing high-stakes professional poker for three years, I decided to take all of my money and start my film career. I thought, "Why not? I have so much of it, what could go wrong?" Well, movies cost a lot to make, and I didn't know how much until I burned through all of it.

When I met Cleveland, he was suffering from an undiagnosed sickness that no vet could seem to figure out. Before I made any films, I spent countless dollars trying to figure out what was wrong with this pup. Finally, we found someone who knew. From that point on, Cleveland and I were inseparable. He sat at my feet for every mouse click as I edited seven feature films; dozens of short, feature documentaries; music videos; commercials; and everything under the sun. I brought him to shoots, meetings, and even coffee shops to write.

Sadly, on January 10, 2014, he was diagnosed with Stage 4 lung cancer. The vets said he would be dead within two weeks. I thought to myself, "Cleveland is a badass 100 pound pitbull, and nothing on the planet can kill him in 14 days." Sure, I've saved his life, but he's saved mine twice as well. Once we were hiking in a swampy park when a snake popped out of nowhere, hissing; within seconds, the snake was dismantled and we were on our way. The second time, we were attacked by a wild dog during a walk, and I almost lost my right hand. Cleveland fought off the dog and stayed with me until help came. After 22 stitches, I was back to editing that night.

But all good things must come to an end, and 48 hours from now my best friend will be put to sleep. The date is May 23, 2014, and he long exceeded his 14-day death sentence. I'm dedicating this book to him because it's the last project for which he sat at my feet while I wrote, edited, or just thought. I haven't made a film without him being there for some part of the process, and this project is our final one together.

Contents

Prologue

You might be asking yourself, "Prologue? Why is there a prologue in a book about editing video?" This isn't exactly *Game of Thrones* here. It's a fair question. Or maybe you're asking the question I always ask myself when I open a book with a prologue: "Do I have to read this?" In this case, the answer is yes. This might be the single most important text you'll read in this entire book. Before we even begin to examine the psychological filmmaking enigma that goes by the misleading name of *editing*, we must first explore exactly what the goal of editing really is. I understand that I'm going a bit out of order here…pun intended…but this is the way it needs to be.

ABOUT THIS BOOK

As you can see from the first several sentences, this isn't your traditional, click-here, drag-here, move-this-there type of book. The purpose of this book, and the "out of order" concept in general, is to teach you how to approach editing primarily through storytelling. You'll find this book is written as if the information, in and of itself, is a story. It builds upon past knowledge as it lays the foundation of central concepts. Before we can lay down that foundation, though, we need to get a few things straight.

There is a huge misconception that editing is primarily a technical skill. It's viewed as a sort of trade that requires the same commitment to training as, say, a massage therapist or nurse. I strongly disagree. While much of the editing training available does rely heavily on a how-to approach, these tangible skills don't make you a good editor. You learn a little editing theory, but a lot about technical issues such as the editing process, types of cuts, how to make cuts, file compression, color correction, and basic navigation of an editing program. The best thing you can do to be a great editor, however, is learn how to *think*. The smartest scientist in the world is much more useful if he or she knows how to conduct an experiment. Knowing the ins and outs of an editing program makes you no more than a technical advisor. Although it's a respectable calling card, and there are many jobs in the industry for what we call postproduction supervisors, it's not the reason you picked up this book. The difference between an editor and a postproduction supervisor is that the postproduction supervisor sees things in a technical language—a very black-and-white approach to editing—whereas the editor sees many shades of gray. A good editor sees things that are open to interpretation and change.

Now, of course, technical-minded editors have overseen amazing works of art, but without using methods of storytelling in the edit room, they are merely messengers. They follow a script. If a script is good, the pieces are well shot, and the director has vision...well, two plus two usually equals four. However, an editor who approaches the process correctly, with the mind of storyteller, can always add something to a film, and any good director would welcome such an upgrade. And if you're usually the one doing it all—directing, conceptualizing, editing—then being able to think like an editor is all the more important. I hope reading this book forever changes your entire approach to editing.

EDITING, OLD AND NEW

Before digital filmmaking became popular, or even possible, things were done on film. The process of putting together a film is now much, much easier. Today, anyone can use Adobe Premiere Pro or Final Cut Pro. But before that, filmmaking was much more difficult. There was an actual craft in cutting film. Sometimes, the best editor was a combination of the mind and the craft. Now, it's just the mind.

Many more editors are working now than back in 1970. It's evolution. The more people *can* do it, the more people *will* do it, and the better the competition. This competition breeds better editors, leading to better final results. I could teach my dog to push buttons on a keyboard. What I can't teach my dog is to see a film in thousands of pieces, and within those pieces, look at the chaos and the infinite combinations for arranging those pieces to tell hundreds of versions of the same story. And I certainly can't teach my dog to spot that one perfect final result. That is one of the secrets of editing. Always know the direction you're traveling. You rarely want to begin editing and not be sure of the final result you're trying to achieve.

It's very much like driving. Whether you're going to the store, the beach, or on a long trip, what matters is how you get there. There are a few ways to get to the store, more ways to reach the beach, and going on a road trip brings in new variables such as traffic and weather. Do you see where I'm going with this analogy? Once you decide on a destination, there are many ways to get there. So how do driving and filmmaking in 1970 tie in with the editing approach? Keep reading.

Somewhere between 1990 and 2000, editing became a digital process. Even when shooting on film, editors would convert it to digital, edit it, and then convert it back to film for print. My big problem with this era is that no one bothered to step back and look at what happened. We changed the process of editing. We digitized it and made it faster, easier, and more accessible—yet we still think about it in the same way.

Does that seem wrong to anyone else? Back to the driving analogy: In that same time span, we went from paper maps and asking for directions at gas stations to MapQuest and eventually GPS. Makes traveling more efficient, doesn't it?

Now that editing is more efficient, you can keep your eye on the prize, which is getting the most out of your footage. The first step to getting the most out of your footage is getting the most of out of *you*. Crafting a story is not something you should be doing while tired, angry, frustrated, or in the thrall of any other negative emotion. You need to take a Zen-like approach. Your energy, whatever energy you're feeling at the time, will translate into your film. If you don't believe that statement, please take my word for it.

GROOVE AND FLOW

You need to find what I call the *editing groove*. Once you find that groove, you should not get up from your computer for any reason unless absolutely necessary. What is the groove? It sounds like some made-up BS concept designed to be motivational. Maybe. But I believe it's real, and it's possible today because the computer puts your clips and everything else you need right at your fingertips. If you were cutting film, that wouldn't be possible. This single fact, to me, changes the results you can get from footage and makes editing *better*. The groove happens when you're consistently thinking creatively instead of constantly worrying about technical skills such as cutting film.

Once you've decided on a direction for your story, or an editing style for something involving a script, you'll begin editing. Where to physically start is something I discuss in the book, but once you begin editing, you'll start to gain a *flow*. That is, as you craft your film, scene, short story, documentary, whatever it is, it will start to take shape. One of three things will happen:

1. That film will take shape and be exactly what you envisioned it to be.

2. The film will take shape, and you'll see that the direction or style needs to be altered in order to achieve that quality you were originally hoping for.

3. The film will start to take shape, but you can see it's not working, forcing you to start over and go in a new direction. Editing is a lot of trial and error as far as assembling pieces in the proper order.

None of the three options is better than the others, nor does one have a higher success rate, but each offers a clear visual of what your film is going to be. Once you've seen that visual, you'll finally be creating based on something real rather than hypothetical.

> **TIP** *It's easier to modify something that exists than to create something from nothing.*

You'll find the philosophy behind that tip laced throughout this book because it applies to several aspects of the editing process. The point is that once you're in the *modifying* stage, that's when the groove begins. And when the groove begins, you want to extend moments of enlightenment as long as you possibly can because those are, by far, the most valuable editing hours. When I hit my groove, I do not get up until a rough cut of a short film or scene is completed.

I used to say that editing is like a puzzle, and no one in his or her right mind would try to solve a puzzle without the picture on the box for reference. As I developed my own editing skills and style, I realized that statement was misleading. Sure, editing is like a puzzle in the sense that you're combining pieces into a final masterpiece, but editing has a few major differences. One of those differences is that you'll only use 10–20 percent of the pieces you have. Puzzles would be a lot more challenging if they included a bunch of pieces you don't need! Another difference is that the image on the outside of the puzzle box is set in stone while an image of a film in your head can change like the wind. And lastly, just because a piece fits perfectly in a spot doesn't mean it won't fit perfectly elsewhere. That's something most puzzles cannot boast.

There is a psychological variable to every edit, and a lot of that comes down to pace and rhythm (which are also discussed in this book). The key is to open your mind to what editing truly is and understand that the variables involved will make or break your entire film. Think about it this way. I could give the same footage to four different editors and get four different products. But let's go further. It doesn't have to be an event film, a wedding video, or a documentary for which the editor crafts the story on the editing board with someone else's captured footage. I could give a scripted conversation between two characters in a film to those same four editors and still get four different scenes. How? Emotion and pace. In editing, it's the little things that make the world of difference. These include knowing when to cut to a facial expression, leave a breath of air between words, close the gap and speed up the dialogue, and cut a meaningless line. Little things also include knowing when and where to use close-ups and how long to hold a shot. Sure, the words spoken will be the same, but the feeling each editor gives the viewers, and the entertainment value and interest they command, will be drastically different.

CONVERSATION IS THE FOUNDATION OF EDITING

When I started as a filmmaker, I dove right into feature filmmaking by writing and directing my first film. I was 20 years old and knew nothing about being a filmmaker. I only knew I had *ideas* (who doesn't?). Ideas are one thing, but execution is something else entirely. Because of the low-budget nature of this film, it was a dialogue-heavy narrative. One scene from the climax, a conversation between two people, was nine pages long. The general rule is that a page of dialogue in a script translates to about a minute on film. We were looking at a nine-minute conversation! Much too long. While editing this scene, my co-editor and I sat in the University of Delaware library for weeks (we weren't students, we just snuck in with fake IDs to use their state-of-the-art editing suite). We tried different ways to cut the scene and nothing worked. My co-editor suggested cutting the scene from the film completely. I'll never forget what he said: "If the beginning of the movie is good, and the end of the movie is good, but you hate the middle, then start cutting things from the middle." Interesting—and correct—concept, but it was the wrong time to apply it. I suggested a compromise. We reduced that nine-minute scene to six minutes. To this day, it's one of the best conversations I've edited in my career. Guess what we cut out by getting rid of three minutes?

Nothing.

Not one line was sacrificed. Not one facial expression was sacrificed. In that session, we learned that a conversation in the real world, a conversation on paper, and a conversation on film are three totally different animals. It was then that I realized that the *conversation* is the foundation for all of editing. Once you understand how to cut a conversation, you'll be able to edit anything. You'll be able to see the final structure of a film even before it's shot. These are the phenomena we will explore in this book.

Now, everything you think you know about editing—how to edit, the way you personally edit, or whatever you've heard—forget it. I want you to learn the information in the exact order in which it appears in this book. Chapter 1 is about the story arc, and it's your foundation. In every chapter after that, you'll be adding information to your current knowledge. Treat it as if it's a puzzle. The more pieces you place, the clearer the picture gets. If you can do that and add pieces to the puzzle as they are explained in this book, in a designed order, you'll be an editor by the time you get to the back cover. Not only will you be an editor, but you'll improve every time you edit, because you'll take each experience and add it as a lesson.

So, in the true nature of *Out of Order...* in Chapter 1, let's go all the way back to the beginning and answer the single most important question: "What is a story?"

## ACCESSING THE DOWNLOADS FOR THIS BOOK

Out of Order isn't just a book—it's also a movie! The film is a character study drama about the invention of digitized editing. It was created for two purposes: for entertainment and to create scenes that can be used as examples to teach the theories discussed in this book.

Buying this book gives you access to two films of mine, a short film called *The Pre-Nup* and the full-length feature film *Out of Order*. The audio narration version of *Out of Order* is referred to throughout this book, with timecodes included so you can fast-forward or rewind directly to the relevant section.

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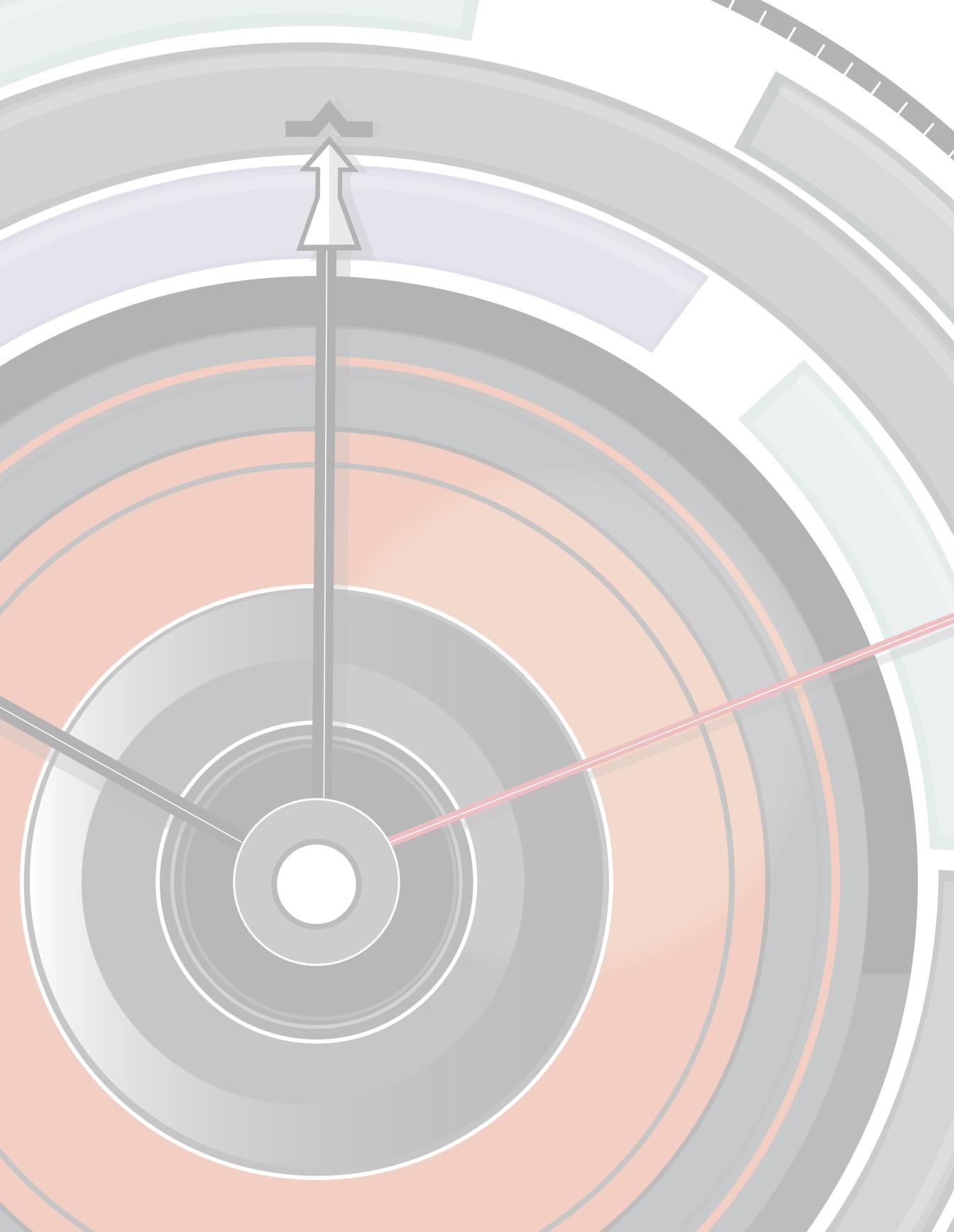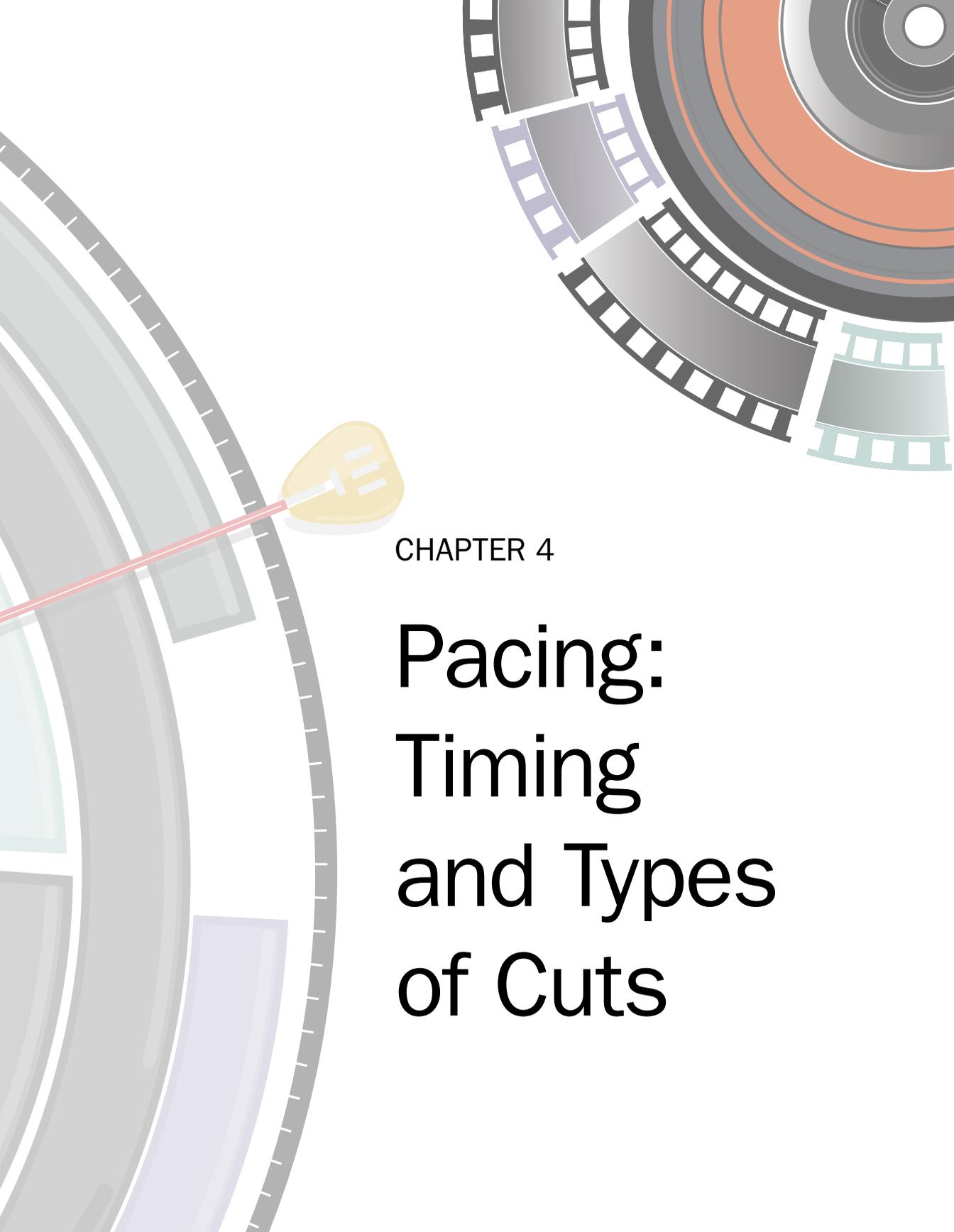
CHAPTER 4

Pacing: Timing and Types of Cuts

One, two, three, four. One, two, three, four. One, two, three, four. One, two, three, four. One, two, three, four. One, two, three, four. By now, maybe you skipped most of that because you couldn't imagine the purpose of it or you thought it must be some kind of mistake. Or, maybe you trusted the book enough to read each number, which allowed a rhythmic pattern to enter your head. The repetition forces you to stop *reading* and start recognizing the shape of the words. It's similar to speed-reading. Your mind forms a flow, and after a few counts you begin to say the phrase, "one, two, three, four," the same way each time.

Mastering pacing is something you should strive for.

Once the flow is formed, it's hard to break unless you give it a different flow. I used the word "rhythmic" earlier. Please note there is a major difference between pacing and rhythm of a film, as I use the terms in this book. Pacing is the timing of cuts, the topic of this chapter. Rhythm is the flow and separation of the overall story, which is covered in Chapter 5.

The purpose of the one, two, three, four count is to show you the foundation of what pacing actually is in a film. The four principles of pacing are:

1. Pattern
2. Symmetry
3. Flow
4. Timing

Pacing is your single most important editing philosophy and is the hardest to grasp. I could sit side by side with you for a year and you still might not master it. The key to pacing is to understand the difference between good pacing and bad pacing. Mastering pacing is something you should strive for, but there will never be a day when it comes to you automatically. At times you may be sharp, and at other times you may be sloppy, but you are generally never going to be perfect.

Defining Pacing

Pacing is an abstract concept that takes practice, practice, and more practice. But don't get frustrated. I'm working on a music video right now and I had to recut it three times until I felt the pacing was right. That's the nature of editing. The important thing is that I knew the first two cuts were not paced well and that the third cut was right. I knew when to keep going—and when to stop. That's what you need to understand about pacing.

The biggest misconception about pacing is that it has anything to do with speed (fast cuts or scenes) or time (length). It's often assumed that the faster something is edited, the better the pacing is. Wrong, wrong, and more degrees of wrong. Something that is cut fast can be perfectly paced. Something that's cut extremely slow can be perfectly paced.

Pacing Examples: Slow and Fast

A lot of great editors believe pacing is managing and utilizing the *space* in a scene— *space* meaning dead air. Some of the greatest examples of pacing come from Quentin Tarantino. The pacing of the conversations in his films really sets the bar for pacing. An example that sticks out in my head is the basement bar scene in *Inglourious Basterds*.

For those who have not seen the film and are planning to, watch it right now because a spoiler is to follow. In the scene, British and American soldiers, who are pretending to be German, meet up with their German contact. She is a famous German actress who is playing a card game with a few Nazi officers when they arrive. When a German character recognizes that one of the British men is not German, the mission falls apart and many people die.

That scene is a masterpiece when it comes to pacing—yet the pacing is very slow. That particular scene manages the space very well. There are long pauses between lines of dialogue and it feels just right. The pacing builds intensity instead of diminishing intensity. Yes, the great writing and acting help, but the editing is a crucial element. In fact, the editing may be the key ingredient to making that scene, and all scenes like it, the masterpiece it is. It comes back to what I said in Chapter 1 about the viewer anticipating what will happen. In this scene in particular, the viewer has a pretty clear understanding of what's going to happen, and the long pauses in the dialogue allow them to relish the anticipation of the predicted outcome.

Pacing ties directly into story arc and conflict. You'll notice in that scene that the back-and-forth dialogue gets *slower* as the scene goes on. What's happening is that the scene gets slower as the outcome becomes clearer. Tarantino uses anticipation as a means to manage the dead air in the scene. The pacing gives you plenty of time to anticipate the many possible outcomes of the scene.

Pacing can—and often does—change. The pacing of a particular scene is for that scene only. Pacing is a situational concept, which is why there are no magic bullet points for getting it right.

A 10-minute dialogue scene in *The Social Network* also takes place in a bar, but it couldn't be more different from the *Inglourious Basterds* scene. In *The Social Network,* it's very fast. And it, too, is a masterful example of the art of pacing. This film, by the way, won the Academy Award for Best Film Editing.

Pacing and Effects on the Viewer

The speed of these two example scenes may be very different—one fast, one slow—but both are paced perfectly. Pacing is situational. It's based on the desired feel, mood, or outcome, and is an ever-changing phenomenon. There is no set rule. It's not as if drama is paced this way and comedy is paced that way. There certainly are trends (which I discuss later), but no rules. A scene may start out fast paced and yet slow down right in the middle.

I have formulated an equation (discussed later in this chapter) that may help you determine the proper pace at any given time. But first, you need to learn the importance of *feeling* the right pace. Most of the time it comes down to feeling and instinct. Consider a heart-rate monitor. Slow indicates tension, fast means intensity or action, and normal means, well, normal.

SLOW PACING

A slow heart rate represents things like tension or anticipation. Beep … beep … beep. Those long spaces give you time to think. What's happening? When will the next beep come? *Will* the next beep come? Relate those beeps to the scene in *Inglourious Basterds* and the dramatic pauses between lines. You have time to anticipate. You have time to let your mind wonder about the possibilities. You can feel the tension in the room.

The slow heart rate can fall on the totally opposite end of the emotional spectrum as well. You can also relate romance to a slow heart rate and rely on the very nature of being in the moment to create that pace. Picture a couple lying in bed with dim lighting. They're laughing, giggling, and talking about their future together. The long

spaces between their lines can let you project yourself into their moment, or think of a moment that was similar in your life. The slow pacing is a good calling card for romance because it allows the viewer to really feel what's happening in the scene.

FAST PACING

A fast heart rate represents action or intensity. Beep beep beep beep beep gives you no time to think; you're just perceiving the storyline at an alarming rate. A great action scene or otherwise intense scene should actually raise the viewer's heart rate.

My best friend is a neuroscientist who loves nothing more than a good experiment. We did a little testing of our own and discovered that the way a film is edited has physical effects on the viewer. We found the effects to be most apparent during action sequences. We monitored the heart rate of several subjects in three age groups, all with similar health histories. (Apparently, that matters in a scientific study—which is why I needed my friend or else I would have just used random people.) We had them all watch the same movies in the same environment and noticed a spike in heart rate during the action sequences. The spike was relatively substantial—an average increase in heart rate of 9 percent. It wasn't on the level of a workout, but there was a common spike among them all at the same point in the film. That may not seem like a lot, but if you consider that the subjects were sitting in chairs and not doing any physical activity, it's pretty impressive.

Then we showed them all an action sequence from a different film, out of context, and nothing happened. That suggests that context, or the lead-in, matters for emotional investment. And then we did a third test: We showed one test group an action sequence with poor pacing and we showed another test group the action sequence with perfecting pacing. The results were amazing. The viewers who watched the film with proper pacing had the physical response. The ones

Pacing affects the viewer physically.

who watched the film with improper pacing showed no spike in heart rate whatsoever. It was a fascinating test, and one day I hope to do a real study and publish the data. But for now, my point is this: Pacing affects the viewer physically. And note that the lead-in to scenes also has an effect on how successful certain moments will be.

Fast-paced scenes should keep viewers on the edge of their seat. There are different levels of fast. There is fast dialogue cutting, and then there is *car-chase–like* action. Obviously the action sequence with no dialogue, or limited dialogue, will be much faster, but keep the heart rate monitor in your mind. For the sake of argument, let's

say that a fast cutting dialogue scene would hit 90 on a heart rate monitor, and an action sequence would range from 120 to 150. (Please note that these rates represent our scaled measurement, not a viewer's actual heart rate. Just know that the viewer's heart will be beating a little faster than normal.)

NORMAL PACING

Normal is the constant in the equation. Normal equals nothing—no drama. Normal is your normal heart rate in everyday life. Normal is you getting dressed. Normal is you eating breakfast. Normal is important because when something not normal occurs, you recognize it. Normal is the gray area between black and white. A good film is normal much of the time. It's the flat parts of the rollercoaster between the ups and downs.

This is why pacing changes all the time. Let's say Jenny is outside working in the garden, minding her own business (normal). We hear a child screaming from inside the house, and Jenny pauses to listen. (At this point, the slow heart rate amplifies the anticipation.) Then the scream happens again, and Jenny runs inside and finds a burglar robbing the house. (Fast heart rate.) That one scene could take you through a spectrum of emotions and heart rates, and the pacing (timing of cuts) should match each part of the scene.

Now that you have a general idea of what pacing is, it's time to break down the principles of pacing.

Principles of Pacing

Remember the four key elements of pacing: pattern, symmetry, flow, and timing. All four elements don't need to be present—or be a focal point of the timing of your cuts—all the time. However, at least one of the four elements must be present in pacing. By the time you finish this chapter, if you watch any movie, trailer, television show, music video, commercial, or even a news story, you should be able to identify one or more of these principles at play in the cutting efforts.

Are all editors working today good? No. Does everything you see on television and the movies work? No. But for the most part, you will see these principles present—and the better the film, the more you'll be able to spot. Depending on the type of film, you'll probably find one element more present than the others. For example, movies rely heavily on timing and flow, whereas music videos are very much a product of pattern and timing. Symmetry is found in movies, but it's a lot harder to spot than timing. Symmetry can take place over a grand scale in a film, while timing happens constantly.

Symmetry is very prominent in great commercials. Can something be properly paced and be missing one of these principles? Yes. But when it comes to these principles, the more the merrier.

Now, let's explore these principles one by one.

Pattern

Pattern is a recurring editing style in a film that mirrors itself in key moments that require close viewer attention. A very basic example of this is the film *Any Given Sunday*. To me, it's one of the best edited films of all time and that is largely because of its pattern. The film is about football and the politics that go with the game. The editor throws the pattern in your face by cutting to a shot of the crowd each time a player forgets about politics and focuses only on the game. The editor then takes that shot of the crowd and *crossfades* it into a similar shot of the crowd from a long time ago—a time where only football mattered, and politics in the game did not. (A crossfade consists of slowly fading two images together; it is discussed in Chapter 5.) It's a *love of the game moment* that draws you in. The editor uses this pattern in key moments in the film, when big plays happen that change the course of the story. That's an extreme example of pattern—a recurring editing style that has its own meaning.

Generally, the use of pattern is rare and hard to recognize, but it can be extremely valuable. Most editors don't consider pattern to be an element of editing. They think it's just a crafty way to make the viewer pay more attention to a particular element of the story. But to me, pattern always exists in editing. The real questions are: "Are you aware of the pattern? and "Are you in control of it?" Or are you merely a creature of habit who can't help but repeat similar editing tendencies throughout the story?

▶ **PATTERN AND STYLE**

Pattern can happen on a small scale or a large scale, and using pattern can help you develop a style. In fact, pattern is branding. Who are you as an editor or filmmaker? I have a pattern. I use the jump cut a lot (cutting to a different frame in the same clip, which is explored later in this chapter). I do it in every film I make without thinking about it. It's just something I do.

EXAMPLE: BREAKING BAD

I discussed *Breaking Bad*'s use of the teaser in its nonlinear story approach in Chapter 3. If you haven't watched *Breaking Bad*, the show began every episode with a teaser. Six successful years of storytelling and captivating an audience, and the teaser was the pattern. The power of this pattern became very evident with the ending of episode 8, which capped the first half of Season 5, Part 1. (Eight episodes aired, and then one year later the next eight aired.) The ending of episode 8 was a flash-forward to the series finale of Season 5, Part 2, which would not air for another year. Well, during that year speculation swirled about the show and how it would end. Just Google *Breaking Bad ending predictions* to see the thousands of blog posts written predicting how it would end (as far as I know, not one of them was right). This was a flash-forward pattern on a grand scale.

EXAMPLE: QUENTIN TARANTINO AND *INGLOURIOUS BASTERDS*

Another example of pattern on a slightly smaller—but still grand—scale is the masterful slow-paced scene in the basement pub in *Inglourious Basterds*. (The director, Quentin Tarantino, has his own patterns as a filmmaker. It doesn't take long to determine you're watching a Tarantino film.) The reason he can get away with this, or any of the long, drawn-out dialogue scenes in his movies, is that we know someone is going to die at the end of the scene. *Inglourious Basterds'* opening scene runs just shy of 20 minutes—the slowest opening scene I've ever experienced. Not many people can get away with showing a guy chopping wood, washing his face, walking inside, waiting for the Germans to show up, and then having a conversation in real time, and keep the audience on the edge of their seat. Tarantino conditioned us from his first film all the way to this film to know something amazing would happen to conclude this insanely slow-paced introduction. He didn't let us down either. It was a slaughter.

If you've seen any of Tarantino's films, you know this as you know the sky is blue. On a grand scale, pattern is storytelling in and of itself.

EXAMPLE: MARTIN SCORSESE

Martin Scorsese is another pattern-oriented filmmaker. His films have the classic look of long takes (long, drawn-out shots that never cut). In every Scorsese movie there's at least one elaborate take that seems borderline unachievable by anyone else. It's his signature. He is old school in that his films aren't *overedited* (too many cuts) as a lot of films are in today's digital world. Whenever I see a long Steadicam shot of someone walking through a room with a few hundred extras, I know Scorsese is the brain is behind it.

EXAMPLE: DAVID FINCHER AND *FIGHT CLUB*

Now, there's one filmmaker who has no signature, and that is David Fincher. I think Fincher is the best filmmaker alive, and arguably to ever live. This is because you can't always tell you're watching a Fincher film. Instead, he puts the story above everything and everyone. You can't help but respect that. For everyone else, it seems, the story is secondary to the style. They make the movie, their way, in their vision, and in their style. This is not a knock on everyone else, myself included, but praise for David Fincher for the simple fact that he doesn't repeat himself. If Fincher does have a pattern or style, it's that he focuses heavily on the pattern of the story and film he's making—and not on any overall style or preference. He creates different patterns in each of his films.

Let's talk about Fincher's movie *Fight Club*. I believe it is the greatest movie ever made. The layers go very deep, and so does the pattern. There are so many hidden patterns edited into this film that it took double-digit viewings for me to catch them all. Unless you know the story, you don't know that Edward Norton's character is talking and interacting with himself the entire film. But once you find that out and go back and watch the movie again, that fact is right in your face over and over again. The first and loudest example of that is when Edward Norton is narrating the line "If you woke up in a different time, at a different place, could you wake up as a different person?" Then a shot of Brad Pitt on an electric walkway appears. I'm not sure I noticed this shot at all the first time I watched the film because the walkway is so crowded. But now, that's the answer to the ending.

Pattern is one of the things that make this film what it is. For starters, Brad Pitt's character, Tyler Durden, flashes onscreen in a single frame several times before he appears in the film. This is not in the book *Fight Club*, which the film is adapted from. No, this is an editing decision made to reference Durden's night job as a screen projectionist, where he splices frames of inappropriate images into family films. Showing Durden himself spliced in similarly is nothing short of genius. As Edward Norton's character says, "No one knows they saw it, but they did." Pattern links those two things in the story.

Now, rewinding a bit in that scene, the film explains how Durden does this. At this point, it mentions that movies don't come all on one reel, they come on a few. And Durden's job is to change the reels in the middle of the movie. Edward Norton says, "It's called a changeover, the movie keeps on going, and no one in the audience has any idea." This is interesting because when the reveal happens during the climax of the film, he repeats the line again, and the pattern occurs. What pattern? Well, the pattern of the way he says the line, and the pacing of the scenes and shot selection

are identical. It brings home a visual familiarity that gives the viewer a subtle sense of déjà vu, thus enhancing the climax. The same dropout of music happens, and you see the *cigarette burns* referred to in the original scene. The patterns in this film are endless.

Another thing *Fight Club* has a lot of, related to pattern, is symmetry.

Symmetry

Remember Chekhov's gun from Chapter 1? "If you show a gun in chapter 1, it had better fire a shot by chapter 3." That's symmetry. Editing should mirror the story's symmetry and also create its own. In the story arc, the downslope is kind of a mirror image of the upslope. It goes up to the climax, then comes down. That kind of symmetry should go as deep as you can take it into the finest detail in your film.

Remember, each scene is its own arc, too. This means each and every moment in your film is symmetrical, just like the overall story. Another word for symmetry in the context of storytelling is *balance*. You can't have light without darkness. You can't have happiness without sadness. You need to travel from one extreme to the other. The day starts dark, the sun rises in the east, and then sets in the west. What shape does that make? An arc. And during that day the arc can take us on a wild rollercoaster ride. It could rain. It could snow, sleet, or hail. It could be beautiful or gloomy. The options are endless, but balance is inevitable. There is a psychological need for balance in life and in film.

The visual serendipity of having an even balance of wide shots and close-ups has an astounding effect on viewers. This symmetry ensures you achieve the maximum amount of emotional opportunity in each viewer's mind. The wide shots balance the close-ups, and the medium shots are neutral. The more even the scale of that balance, the clearer the emotional goal becomes. Understanding this is controlling it. If you choose to tip the scales in favor of one or the other, you need to be conscious of it and know what you're accomplishing by doing so. Using more close-up shots than wide shots means you're heavily focusing on characters and their emotions. In this case, you're trying to achieve your emotional goals through expression as opposed to action. It's intense. When you favor wide shots, you're making a conscious effort to make the viewers feel as if they're a part of the scene or in the room.

If it seems like I'm explaining shot selection again, I'm not. The point here is what you're accomplishing with specific combinations of shots. First you learn one punch, and then you learn a combo. Everything in editing is intertwined. Concepts bleed onto each other. Shot selection is really about selecting the right shot at the right time; pacing is about the timing of cuts and balancing the types of shots. Symmetry, one

of the four principles of pacing, is the bridge between the concepts of shot selection and pacing. (Keep in mind that we haven't even explored the timing of cuts, which is the implementation of pacing. We're still talking about the principles.)

Let's take symmetry even deeper, remaining aware of the arc and starting with the exposition (the beginning). Let's say that when you establish your conditions in the exposition, you use a specific shot combination to introduce a concept. Jenny walks into a bar and tells the bartender about her money problems. To establish this, you approach it in a standard way: You establish the bar with a wide shot, single Jenny out with a medium, and then use the close-up when she delivers the line, "I'm broke." Then Jenny slides a twenty-dollar bill across the bar and asks for a refill. For this shot, you choose an overhead, shooting straight down on the bar, featuring the top of the two characters' heads and the money. Then you punch in close on the twenty-dollar bill. You end with a close-up of Jenny, smiling and saying, "I would spend my last dollar on this drink, I need it so bad." Jenny winks.

Your shot combination and order is crucial here. Later in the story, Jenny starts a business, makes millions, and gets married. Then she gets divorced, loses most of her money, and the movie ends with her depressed at the bar. Guess what happens next? Jenny slides a twenty-dollar bill across the bar and says, "I would spend my last dollar on this drink, I need it so bad." This is where symmetry plays a role in editing. You've conditioned the viewer to see this moment a certain way, so if you present it the same way, it will have a much bigger impact. You want the same shot order and the same shot selection. I will go as far as to say that each shot should be the same duration. Films do this all the time, and you don't even realize it.

Symmetry can happen in all kinds of ways. Repeating music, using color grades on key moments, and adding sound effects are all ways to cue the viewers to think "I've been here before." When the viewers feel something familiar, you should be accounting for that in the pacing. Sometimes a cue can come from other sources, and you may need to use the pace to cue the viewers, which means approaching pacing for the scene that it is in and not with the goal of symmetry in mind. These concepts are explored in later chapters.

> **NOTE** *The key to symmetry is familiarity. When viewers are familiar with a moment as they enter it, you've accomplished a great deal in your story. It means you told them something, they remembered it, and that information helps tell your story later on. That's impactful storytelling and editing. There isn't a story in the world, good or bad, that doesn't have balance. In film, editing is one of the key ways to achieve that symmetry.*

Flow

Ask a random filmmaker for the definition of pacing. The answer is likely to involve some sort of action. The most common response I hear is, "It just moves," while the person snaps his or her fingers. While that is a basic understanding of pacing, what the person is really describing is a small but very important element of pacing called *flow*. It's easier to understand flow when it's faster, but the films that flow the best are slower. And with the slower ones, it's harder to achieve flow.

A great way to learn flow is by editing music videos. If you are just starting out as a filmmaker and haven't done much editing, start editing music videos. This is not because they're the be-all and end-all of film editing, but because editing music videos can teach you some really good habits. It shows you how to cut to the music and integrate that into the editing of a film. It also can teach bad habits. Relying on cutting to the music is a crutch that can cripple your pacing, so be careful when you try to take the music video approach to any other type of narrative. (The exception is a montage, a collection of short shots edited together to condense space, time, and information, discussed in Chapter 5.)

These days, most videos don't have much of a story. It's sad but true. I don't do many of them anymore. When I first started out as an editor, I did a lot of rap videos. They were basic with people rapping to the camera in five or six cool locations. I didn't know any better, and it forced me to be a good editor. In some situations, editing is all you have to make something remotely acceptable. I believe every editor should work on at least three music videos. You can only take them so far, but it's an exercise in flow. Because there's no story, you usually have one speed: fast. So it flows like a river from start to finish with fast cuts all the way through. This can teach you the value of a single frame.

With a story, however, you need to take your flow and move it into storytelling. You also need to understand that a story has many different speeds. Some parts are fast and some parts are slow. Understanding the flow of the *river* is what helps you determine what cutting speed to use. The speed of the actual narrative is a good indicator of cutting speed. Whatever the speed of the story or the arc is, you want to match it. Flow means making hard choices. You may end up cutting redundant lines. You may shorten or lengthen pauses. You may take a facial expression from one part of the scene and move it to a different scene because you want to alter the speed of the cutting. You don't edit a film exactly how it's shot—you trim the fat and beef up the meat.

I compare the ending of scenes or moments to texting. If you're texting a friend back and forth, it could look a little something like this:

> You: Hey what r u doing tonight?
>
> Friend: Nothing, u want to get together?
>
> You: Yeah I get off work at 6, happy hour doesn't end until 9, want to go?
>
> Friend: Yeah let's do it, u r buying the first round.
>
> You: OK cool. I'll have the cold beer waiting for u.
>
> Friend: OK

That's a standard conversation. The part that drives me insane is the response "OK." Really? You wasted a whole message on that? That's how you need to treat film flow. If it doesn't move the story forward, cut it. The "OK" contributes nothing to the story. You can make the argument that it's closure to the scene. When it comes to the beginning and ending, try thinking of each scene as a piece of the bigger story. You don't need closure in every scene. A scene can just end before we, as an audience, see it end.

▶ GOODBYES WITH MEANING

My brother, a lawyer, asked me why people never say goodbye at the end of phone conversations on TV. They just hang up. "It's a waste of time to say goodbye. It's much quicker to hang up," I responded. It's as simple as that. Every second is valuable. Every word that isn't accomplishing something is a second your viewer could give up on you. That is why we let the viewer assume the goodbye without showing it.

Saying goodbye, however, can be a major plot point. Maybe a woman is saying goodbye to her father on his deathbed. In that case, it's an emotional goodbye that will stay with the character for the rest of the story. Here, you linger in the moment as long as you can because you're capitalizing on the emotional.

The lesson here is that it's not about the words spoken—it's about the context they're spoken in. A person saying goodbye at the end of a casual phone call doesn't compare to a woman saying goodbye to her father on his deathbed. Even if the words are the same, the context of the moment calls for a different pacing.

TIP *One of the best things you can do as an editor is edit your scenes with this philosophy in mind: Enter in the middle of the scene and leave before it's over.*

When you enter in the middle of the moment, viewers are already playing catch-up. That gives their minds something to do. They're establishing a backstory in their minds with information you're giving them. The same thing works for the ending. Leave before it's over, and the audience gets to infer the ending with the information you gave them. This feeds the idea that the film is a collaboration between filmmaker and viewer.

Don't finalize things. Now, take this with a minor grain of salt. What I mean is every conversation in your story doesn't need to come to a complete close. Watch any movie at random and count the number of scenes that end with some sort of finalizing line (such as OK, goodbye, see you later) or a character walking out of the scene. You won't find many—or any. That's because of flow. The editor made the choice to trim the fat.

Timing

Timing refers to deciding when to make a cut. Timing is the sixth sense of an editor. Knowing exactly at which frame to cut from one clip to the other is learned by experience. Experience is the key to good timing. Being able to say, "I've been here before" is the true measure of greatness. The main problem with that is that you've actually never been there before. You may have been in similar situations, but not the same.

Before becoming a filmmaker, I was a professional poker player. You might be thinking, "Wow, those careers seem vastly different." Yes, they certainly offer different lifestyles, but the mental focus, attention to detail, and importance of past experiences are quite similar. In poker, they say you'll never be in the same situation two times. It's true. The room, the cards, the money at stake, the people in the hand, the time of day, the build-up to that hand—all of those details come into play during any given hand. It's a true ripple effect. It may seem like you've been in this situation before, but it's not the same.

That's true of film as well. You'll never actually be in the same situation twice. All you can do is take each situation for what it's worth and log it into your mental library as to how such situations play out. You'll call upon your mental library in each and every decision you make. Some call that instinct, and sure, instinct plays a role. But history also plays an important role in the decision of when to cut. Being good at pacing doesn't mean being able to sit down with raw footage and make a beautifully

paced film on the first try. Pacing is about trial and error. It's about looking at a film and saying, "No, we need to start over." For quick turnarounds, same-day edits, and the like, just know that a rushed film will never reach its true potential. Edited films almost always require a period of mental processing. You shouldn't spend 12 hours editing a film and then immediately judge your work. You need some distance. You need to take time to process.

Pacing is being able to look at a film and know that it's improperly paced. Being a disciplined editor means having the patience to re-edit a film until it feels right. (You'll explore the timing of cuts later in this chapter.)

SPOTTING CUES TO TIMING

When the word "timing" is used in the context of pacing, it's referring to using the cues as a means to cut. *Cues* can come from anywhere, but usually they come from your characters. If a character looks at something, chances are your next shot will be what he sees. It seems like the same idea as the narrative perspective, but the lag time between when the character looks at something and when you show what he sees is timing. How long you delay what the character sees will determine its emotional impact. The cue comes from the moment as well. If she looks into her wallet to see how much money is inside, holding on her face for three seconds before you show the wallet is probably not a good idea because she's just checking. However, if we as the audience know how much money she has, and she's checking her wallet to find out money has been stolen, then you would hold on her face to capture her reaction.

This ties back to the narrative perspective discussed in Chapter 3. When I talked about showing what characters see, I never specifically covered *when* or *if* they should see things.

EXAMPLE: TIMING IN ACTION

Let's say Mary and Sally are sitting in the dining room eating dinner. The story is told from Mary's perspective. Sally asks Mary, "What time is it?" As the editor, you should show Sally asking the question. Then you show Mary looking at her watch. Do you show the actual watch? No. The only reason to show the watch is if the time of day is important to the story. In this case, Mary simply replies, "5:30." Showing the watch would be bad timing.

If several shots of the watch were filmed with the intent of using them, you may feel like you need to show the watch. But don't be distracted by what you have. Why is this a case of timing and not shot selection? Well, it's always a case of shot selection, just

as it's always a case of narrative perspective. The pacing will be destroyed if you show the shot of the watch because the viewer doesn't need a visual reference to something that doesn't matter. In short, no matter where you time the shot of the watch, it won't be timed properly. It's a shot set for failure.

Sometimes, editors get lost in the shots they have and feel like they need to use everything. Let's continue the scene. After the time is established, Mary and Sally hear a loud bang in the kitchen. Sally gets up and runs to the kitchen. She looks in the kitchen and says, "Oh no, you're not going to believe this." Mary, walking slowly behind, enters the doorway and sees broken plates on the floor.

The shot sequence and timing would be as follows: You show a shot of the two women reacting to the bang. In the same shot, Sally gets up. You show Sally reacting to what she's seeing in the kitchen, and then her line to Mary. You do *not* show what's in the kitchen at this point. That's bad timing. There are three reason *not* to do that here:

- You've created a moment of anticipation. The viewers are asking themselves, "What is it?"

- The story is told from Mary's perspective; if she hasn't seen it yet, neither have you.

- Once you've seen what made the bang, the story is over. Everything after that doesn't matter.

Now Mary enters the doorway and reacts to what's in the kitchen. Focus on her reaction as long as possible. Then, in the frame before you feel it becomes redundant, cut to what Mary sees. That, in a nutshell, is timing.

Timing of Cuts: The Pacing Formula

Pacing is the timing of cuts. This section helps you determine the proper timing of cuts. Don't confuse this with the concept of timing as discussed earlier. Timing is a singular moment while the timing of cuts refers to a plural concept. This means determining an average cut time through the scene. The equation you're about to learn is not an exact science—it's a guideline to help you analyze the type of pacing you need and analyze whether the pace you've created is correct. Ready? Here it is:

Speed of Conversation + Length of Scene + Number of Characters + Drama + Mood = Pace

Ask yourself, "What's my goal? What's the scene trying to accomplish in terms of feelings of the viewer?"

The following sections discuss these elements of the equation in detail. Remember, each one is only one element of the equation. Each part of the equation plays an equal role in determining what the pace should be.

Speed of Conversation in a Scene

When I say the *speed of conversation,* I'm referring to an actual conversation in a scene. The conversation is the foundation for all of editing, as discussed later. (If a scene doesn't have a conversation, then substitute *scene* for *conversation*, and the scene would center on the unfolding of events.) Even in a music video, the lyrics act as a conversation. The speed of conversation means the natural speed in which characters in the scene communicate back and forth. If the scene is an argument between two characters, it would have a much faster back and forth—faster cutting—than if two characters are talking about the weather. The pacing of the scene reflects the speed of the conversation.

OUT OF ORDER MOVIE Take a look at timecode 1:15:19 in the Out of Order *movie. Focus on the pacing of the scene: It starts out slow and builds throughout the scene, and then drops back to a slower pace by the end (**FIGURE 4.1**). It follows the natural flow of the conversation. However, the part you should be focusing on here is that as the speed of the conversation picks up, the cutting speed also picks up.*

FIGURE 4.1 The conversation starts slow and then speeds up.

It's best to look at the natural flow, or intended natural flow, of the conversation and use that as a basis. For example, wedding vows naturally have a slower back and forth. Usually, the vows are used as the climax of a wedding film, so you may want to find ways that the pacing is faster than the organic flow of that conversation. A trick I like to use is moving into an intercutting sequence (see Chapter 3 for more on intercutting). I use footage from other parts of the wedding, making the vows last longer but with faster cuts.

If you didn't want to interrupt the vows, you could simply use a faster cutting speed during the vows. The key is to include reaction shots from the audience in addition to the bride and groom talking. You don't always have to show the person who is talking. Once their vows are covered with B-roll, you can actually change the speed in which they talk by elongating or shortening the pauses between words.

The speed of conversation is always the first element of a scene I consider. The original intention is always the constant. You're either trying to re-create, go faster, or go slower, but the point is the original intention gives you a reference as opposed to working from an abstract idea.

> **TIP** The speed of the conversation will have an effect on the average cut time. A slow conversation should average fewer cuts per second than a faster conversation.

Length of Scene

The *length of scene* is another indicator of pace. The following is not a rule, but a guideline: The longer the scene is, the faster the pacing should be to help sustain interest and make things feel shorter than they actually are. Unless your name is Quentin Tarantino, you're not likely to generate interest in a dialogue scene that lasts eight minutes. Generally, the longer the scene, the faster the pace should be.

Consider two guys talking about the weather. How long do you think you can get away with that before your audience turns on you? Forty-five seconds to a minute might be the longest anyone could stand a scene like that. That's not very long, but it goes hand in hand with the speed of conversation theory. If you have two guys talking about the weather, the speed of the conversation is most likely slower, and a 45-second scene matches with the slower pace. Now you should be seeing how the pieces of the equation start to align. With characters arguing, the scene could easily last two to three minutes, and it would require a faster pace.

Let me throw a monkey wrench into this situation, however. Let's say you have a two-minute scene of two characters talking about the weather, and you want it to feel properly paced. What do you do? First, hope this never happens. Second, one thing you can count on is that if a story takes two minutes to talk about the weather, then it's a very important story element. The weather may be affecting the characters' travel plans or even threatening their lives. These things lead to intensity, which in turn leads to a faster pace. That aligns with the length of your scene.

I've yet to make a film where every scripted scene made the final cut of the movie.

You may be thinking, "What if I have a scene with two characters talking about the weather that lasts two minutes and it's not important to the story at all?" Then your solution is easy: Cut the scene. Hard choices need to be made. I've yet to make a film where every scripted scene made the final cut of the movie. Talking about meaningless weather sounds like a great scene to cut.

Number of Characters

The *number of characters* is another important element in the art of pacing. The more characters you have, the more vantage points you have the opportunity to show. It's a game of numbers. If you have two characters in a room talking about the weather, you're pretty limited in what you can show. Because talking about the weather doesn't generally result in an intense, fast conversation, the pacing is going to be slower. But if you have six characters in a room talking about the weather, then all of a sudden the pacing can be amplified.

> **OUT OF ORDER MOVIE** *Take a look at 1:04:44 in the* Out of Order *film. Two people in a room are talking. Immediately following this scene, seven people in a room are talking. Notice how the pacing drastically switches between the two scenes just because of the number of characters (**FIGURE 4.2**). The conversation isn't more intense, and the speed of the conversation hasn't changed. It comes down to more characters and their reactions. Try counting how many times it cuts to a character who isn't talking.*

FIGURE 4.2 More characters leads to a faster pace and more cutting.

Think about two people in a room talking about the weather; you'll likely have three usable shots. A wide shot, a two-shot of both characters, and a medium shot of both characters. It's unlikely that you would have a close-up of either character because using close-ups would produce a repetitive-looking scene that offers no visual stimulus. If there's no intensity in what the characters are saying, as a viewer I need the visual stimulus of wide and medium shots because the context of the moment is equal to what they're saying.

I have a theory I call "3's company" that says once you add a third person to the scene, you immediately gain an opportunity to show a significant number of shots that you couldn't have before. Let's say you add a third person to the weather conversation scene. Now you still have the original three-shot opportunities, but you also have five more to add to that list. You now have a wide three-shot of all the characters. You have a medium shot of the third character. You also have a combination of two shots showing two of the three characters. This third character offers more shots, which leads to more cuts, which leads to faster cuts, which leads to a faster pace. Here's the best part about the third person: They don't even have to talk. All they have to do is react. If they react to what's being said in the scene, then they're a part of the scene. According to the 3's company theory, the more characters you have, the more vantage points you have an opportunity to show.

Drama and Mood

Drama is associated with what you want the viewers to feel. Drama is something you can control. *Mood*, on the other hand, is something the characters feel, and it's totally out of your hands. (That is up to the story.) These two concepts don't always line up—sometimes they do and sometimes they don't. Think about a comedy, for example. Physical comedy refers to pain. If a character slips and falls in a dramatic way, he's going to feel pain. The viewers won't feel pain, though—they'll just laugh. Drama is between you and the audience; mood is between the characters.

You can have three different characters in a scene who all feel different emotions, while the audience is feeling something different from all the characters. The major thing that comes into play here is the narrative perspective. If you're telling the story from a particular character's perspective, your hands are tied.

Back to the weather conversation. Three characters are in a two-minute scene talking about weather. Two of the characters are joking and the third character is scared. The viewers should associate with the funny characters. Three characters (Number of Characters) + a two-minute scene (Length of Scene) + a fast-talking conversation (Speed of Conversation) + wanting the audience to laugh (Drama) + the mixed emotions of the characters, laughter and fear (Mood) = a faster-paced scene. Almost all the elements point to a fast pace, and the point that brings it home is drama.

> **TIP** *Comedy tends to have a faster, poppy pace. It's not quite as fast as action, but it's faster than most genres. (Poppy refers to popcorn cutting, discussed in the next section. It just means that the cutting happens at the ends of lines. Simply put, whenever a character is talking, you can see them. This doesn't mean any genre has a particular cutting style; it's more of a current trend.)*

Types of Cuts

Many different types of cuts are available when you hit the editing board. A cut isn't just a cut, unless it's what's known as a hard cut. When choosing the type of cut to use at any given time, your decision will depend on four things: genre, length, style, and pacing. Some genres favor certain types of cuts, which are covered in the following sections.

The thing to remember is that there is never really a right answer. After all, editing is an art form, and you can go in whatever direction you choose. I can only offer guidelines on choosing the types of cuts that follow the pattern of where editing is today. Fifty years ago the trends were much different.

> **TIP** *Pacing will always be your biggest indicator of what cut to use and how to time it.*

HARD CUT

A standard cut, or *hard cut,* means simply cutting from clip A to clip B as shown in **FIGURE 4.3**. You can see here that a hard cut in the middle of this conversation would be seamless. There's no question about where we are. However, if you want to transition to another part in the story, because of the jarring *hard cut* that its name suggests, it doesn't give a viewer much time to acclimate to the new scene. This is why most hard cuts are contained within a scene and not used to go from scene to scene.

FIGURE 4.3 In a hard cut, the most commonly used type of cut, you cut from clip A to clip B.

Hard cuts are quite commonly used, especially in television. Usually, they are used when going from scene to scene. Often a transition isn't needed to make a smooth cut to another moment in your film. The main advantage of hard cutting is that it gives the viewer zero time to process or question.

I always weigh the use of a hard cut based on what I'm trying to achieve in the viewers' response. If I want them to be in moment A, and then instantly be in moment B, I use a hard cut. To make this work, you'll obviously be depending on the audience members to transition themselves to that moment. If you're traveling to a different time in the

story, a hard cut isn't a good idea because it's perceived to be the same time period. I discuss the concept of time in Chapter 6.

The exception to this recommendation is if you've established the jumping around in time in advance. In that case, a hard cut is useful because the audience knows instantly where they are and the story moves much faster. Using a hard cut is entirely based on the context.

JUMP CUT

A *jump cut* cuts from a frame in a clip to a later frame in the same clip—or to a clip that looks very similar. The two shots in **FIGURE 4.4** show what a jump cut looks like.

In most cases, I don't recommend jump cuts. If a scene has someone giving a speech on a stage, you wouldn't just cut to a later point in the speech in the same shot. You need to cover the cut with a B-roll shot or cut to a different angle of the speech to keep the visual fluidity. However, at times you can use a jump cut for stylistic purposes. That's something I tend to do quite a bit.

FIGURE 4.4 In this example of a jump cut, the frames look similar because they're from the same exact clip. The image on the right, however, comes from much later in the clip.

In the stylistic format, a jump cut can mean one of two things:

- Passing time
- Repetition over time

Let's start with the idea of passing time. Say that a girl tells a boy, "Wait here. I'll be right back." The girl exits, and the camera fixates on the boy as he waits. The point of your story is that the girl takes forever to come back—or maybe doesn't come back at all. You need to give the viewers the impression of time passing, without forcing them to sit there and watch him wait in real time. This is an ideal time to use a jump cut.

*OUT OF ORDER MOVIE At timecode 00:08:04 in the Out of Order film you can see a great example of a jump-cutting sequence as books stack higher without the frame changing (**FIGURE 4.5**). This is an example of using jump cutting to pass time in a visually interesting way.*

FIGURE 4.5 Books magically start to stack as the character works.

One way to create this type of jump cut is to lock your camera down and never move it. Then, have your subject run through a variety of actions and poses that are associated with waiting. Maybe he twiddles his thumbs. Then he paces back and forth. He does a few jumping jacks. He stretches. He lies on the ground. You record all that in one long clip, make cut points in the parts you don't want, and then condense the long clip down into its many parts. In the playback, it looks like the subject moves around doing all these different actions, but the shot never moves. This trick gives the audience the impression that a lot of time has passed, but it only took you a small amount of time to do it.

Another way to do a jump cut involves repetition over time. This is the exact same idea, with less need to lock the camera down. Personally, I would still lock it down for seamless purposes, but it's totally acceptable and even trendy to give it a fly-on-the-wall look. Let's say this same boy goes into a clothing store to find an outfit for the big night. You set up your camera over his shoulder as he looks in a mirror and tries on 20 different outfits. You record one long clip and then cut out the dead space. It's the same idea as the other jump cut, except the camera isn't locked down. You might

use this same technique in a dialogue setting when a character is doing a repetitive dialogue delivery. Maybe it's a series of jokes or funny faces. The point here is that a character repeats an action in a variety of ways, and you choose to showcase them all, one after the other.

L-CUT AND J-CUT

Editors also need to master *L-cuts* and *J-cuts*. A J-cut occurs when the audio from the next clip is heard before the video. An L-cut is when the video switches before the audio. The names of these cuts come from the shapes they make on the cutting timeline:

- J-cut means you hear the audio before you see the video that matches with that audio. It doesn't mean you're staring at a black screen. It just means you're looking at clip A while hearing the audio from clip B.

- L-cut means you're still hearing the audio from a shot but you're seeing a new shot. The viewer is looking at clip B while still hearing audio from clip A.

Here's an example of a J-cut: A character says his line, and the other character starts to say his line—but the camera remains on the first character. Then, in the middle of the other character's response, it cuts to that second character. The J-cut is the key to creating good conversational dialogue. (Remember, conversations are the foundation for all of editing.)

A good way to practice editing is to take a conversation between two characters and try to edit it together in the most seamless way possible. You can't do that without L-cutting and J-cutting because they make things more conversational. You are accustomed to seeing J-cuts and L-cuts because every drama show on television uses these techniques.

The question isn't really about whether you should be L-cutting or J-cutting—it's about the timing. You can find clues to the timing in the conversation's grammar. When do you cut from one character to the other in a conversation? Listen to the dialogue and try to find the punctuation (such as commas) and beats in what they're saying.

For example, look at this sentence: "I drove to the store, and when I pulled in the parking lot, guess who was standing right there?"

That sentence has two break points delineated by commas. You could use one or both commas as cut points. You might cut once at the first comma, and cut back at the second comma. Doing so offers a conversational flow to the scene and includes the character who is not talking as part of the response. If no natural commas occur in the dialogue, try to find the pauses in the dialogue. Use those moments as your cut points.

Remember these three things:

- For cut points, you can use multiple commas, one comma, or none. If you're cutting to another character during a sentence, use the commas as your reference point for cuts.

- Cutting to the other character's reactions is what adds conversational flow and reminds the audience that this is a conversation. By cutting to an expression, you're creating the conversation. This is why the conversation is the foundation of editing. There doesn't even need to be a response. By simply showing that other character, you have created the response. It's so important to practice this because you do it in editing all the time.

- Not every piece of dialogue offers this opportunity. A character saying "Hello!" does not offer this same technique. You would never want to cut in the middle of a word. That situation is where popcorn cutting comes into play.

All the types of cuts are used in all genres, but drama is where you'll find L-cutting and J-cutting used the most.

POPCORN CUT

Popcorn cutting, which is generally reserved for comedy, is very simple: If a character is talking, they are onscreen. There are no reaction shots while someone else is talking. An extreme version of popcorn cutting is that to show a character's reaction at a key point in the middle of the dialogue, you show the reaction, break the dialogue, and then cut back to the character speaking. Popcorn cutting is also sometimes used in fast-paced dialogue.

Pacing is an ever-changing phenomenon. It changes with the times, and can change right in the middle of a scene. The most important thing is to learn to be able to tell the difference between right pacing and wrong pacing. Once you know that, it's a matter of trial and error.

CUTTING ON THE ACTION

Considering the story arc and conflict are at the top of the list of important things in editing. This is not because they're so utterly important to the actual craft of an editor, but because they're important to the decision making of an editor. It's also because they're overlooked by most editors. Cutting on the action is the single most important technique when it comes to making films *visually seamless*.

The best kind of cut is one the viewers don't see. Of course, you can see every cut, but some you notice and some you don't. Cutting on the action is the best way to hide a cut. *Cutting on the action* is exactly what it sounds like: When action spreads across two or more clips, the editor makes a cut in the middle of that action.

Note that *action* is just another word for *movement*. For example, **FIGURE 4.6** shows a man drinking. Your eyes go directly to the movement (you'll have to imagine the movement in the still image). Always remember that in film: *The viewers' eyes go to movement*. So when viewers watch the completion of an action across two clips, they don't pay attention to the cut.

FIGURE 4.6 Notice how your eyes are drawn to movement—the man drinking. Cutting on the action means making your cut points in the middle of movements such as this.

Here's the best example I can give: Consider a pitcher's wind-up in a baseball game. Say you are filming with two cameras (or maybe one camera and you film the same scene twice). Your ideal cut point is in the middle of the pitcher's release of the ball. As soon as his hand gets to the top of his release, that's when you cut from one clip to the other. The hand motion is happening so fast that your eye is trying to find the finishing of the movement. The searching for movement across clips occurs instantly.

You can use this method on any type of shot. If you have a wide shot of a man setting a glass on a table, you can cut to a close-up of the glass as it hits the table in the middle of the movement. The movement can be fast or slow, big or small. As the editor, try to find the action and use that as a basis for cut points while factoring in everything else, and your cuts will be seamless.

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