

Manipulating Time

Screen time: a period of time represented by events within a film (e.g. a day, a week).

Subjective time. The time experienced or felt by a character in a film, as revealed through camera movement and editing (e.g. when a frightened person's flight from danger is prolonged).

Compressed time. The compression of time between sequences or scenes, and within scenes. This is the most frequent manipulation of time in films: it is achieved with cuts or dissolves. In a dramatic narrative, if climbing a staircase is not a significant part of the plot, a shot of a character starting up the stairs may then cut to him entering a room. The logic of the situation and our past experience of medium tells us that the room is somewhere at the top of the stairs. Long journeys can be compressed into seconds. Time may also be compressed between cutaways in parallel editing. More subtle compression can occur after reaction shots or close-ups have intervened. The use of dissolves was once a cue for the passage of a relatively long period of time.

Long take. A single shot (or take, or run of the camera) which lasts for a relatively lengthy period of time. The long take has an 'authentic' feel since it is not inherently dramatic.

Simultaneous time. Events in different places can be presented as occurring at the same moment, by parallel editing or cross-cutting, by multiple images or split-screen. The conventional clue to indicate that events or shots are taking place at the same time is that there is no progression of shots: shots are either inserted into the main action or alternated with each other until the strands are somehow united.

Slow motion. Action which takes place on the screen at a slower rate than the rate at which the action took place before the camera. This is used: a) to make a fast action visible; b) to make a familiar action strange; c) to emphasize a dramatic moment. It can have a lyric and romantic quality or it can amplify violence.

Accelerated motion (undercranking) . This is used: a) to make a slow action visible; b) to make a familiar action funny; c) to increase the thrill of speed.

Reverse motion. Reproducing action backwards, for comic, magical or explanatory effect.

Replay. An action sequence repeated, often in slow motion, commonly featured in the filming of sport to review a significant event.

Freeze-frame. This gives the image the appearance of a still photograph. Clearly not a naturalistic device.

Flashback. A break in the chronology of a narrative in which events from the past are disclosed to the viewer. Formerly indicated conventionally with defocus or ripple dissolves.

Flashforward. Much less common than the flashback. Not normally associated with a particular character. Associated with objective treatments.

Extended or expanded time/overlapping action. The expansion of time can be accomplished by intercutting a series of shots, or by filming the action from different angles and editing them together. Part of an action may be repeated from another viewpoint, e.g. a character is shown from the inside of a building opening a door and the next shot, from the outside, shows him opening it again. Used nakedly this device disrupts the audience's sense of real time. The technique may be used unobtrusively to stretch time, perhaps to exaggerate, for dramatic effect, the time taken to walk down a corridor. Sometimes combined with slow motion.

Ambiguous time. Within the context of a well-defined time-scheme sequences may occur which are ambiguous in time. This is most frequently communicated through dissolves and superimpositions.

Universal time. This is deliberately created to suggest universal relevance. Ideas rather than examples are emphasized. Context may be disrupted by frequent cuts and by the extensive use of close-ups and other shots, which do not reveal a specific background.