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# Non-Continuity, Continuity, Discontinuity : A Theory of Genres in Early Film

In my essay entitled « The Non-Continuous Style of Early Film »<sup>1</sup>, I surveyed a group of what could be called anomalies in early film - elements which, from the viewpoint of the later dominant style of film-making (which we could call - with caution and reservation - the classical style of continuity) seemed deviant. Inspired partly by the work of Noël Burch and partly by own interest in later « deviant » styles of film-making in the avant-garde, I felt it was important not to see these anomalies as primitive mistakes groping towards the later established ideal of match cutting and diegetic unity but as indications of another direction in film narrative than that of later dominant cinema, a road not taken by the major film industries.

My essay was announced as preliminary, and in it I indicated my uncertainty as to whether the group of anomalies I surveyed could actually be thought of as forming an organic and unified style in early film. It now seems to me that the importance of the elements I discussed is not primarily that they sketch an alternate approach to narrative than that of the classical style, but rather that they reveal how complex and dialectical the development of the classical style is. Rather than serving as markers on a deviant route in film history, the elements of non-continuity in early film punctuate the body of film history, becoming a series of blind spots. For traditional historians who see film as moving towards an ideal of continuity, the anomalies can only be seen as errors or failed attempts. For recent theorists such anomalies are

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<sup>1</sup> / 1. This paper has since been published in French : « Le style non-continu du cinéma des premiers temps », in *Les Cahiers de la Cinémathèque* (Perpignan, hiver 1979) and in English in *Cinema 1900/1906 : An Analytical Study*, ed. Roger Holman, Bruxelles, F.I.A.F., 1982, Volume 1, which anthologizes all of the papers delivered at the Brighton Conference.

significant as deconstructive deviations. But in fact these critical points in film discourse reveal precisely that film history can not be conceived according to static models of coherence or non-coherence to an (often unspecified) ideal of classical continuity (which, after its establishment would seem to have no history, other than that of a static definition, while other films can only be conceived through the relation of deviance from the norm).

Early cinema, then, need not be viewed as either a moment in the natural development of the later modes of classical continuity, or as a prelapsarian era before the betrayal of cinema to the monopolistic representatives of bourgeois culture and morality. The challenge that early cinema offers to film history is a search for a method of understanding the transformations in narrative form in cinema's first decades; a method that maintains an awareness of early film's difference from later practices, without defining it simply as a relation of divergence from a model of continuity (that, in fact, has not yet appeared). It is precisely the *history* involved in these changes that must be understood.

There is no question that the understanding of this history ultimately must include not only a close and comparative viewing of all existing films with the tools of analysis that structuralism and semiology has provided to film study, but also an understanding of these films as economic products. The means of production and consumption (in a broad understanding of these terms) of early film is only now being described and investigated. It is only from a full description of the means of financing, the actual methods of production of films, the processes of their distribution, the practices of exhibition, and finally the way films were received by audiences, that a truly historical view of cinema will be possible. If the methods of analysis of films as signifying systems and as economic commodities are different, they are by no means mutually exclusive, nor ultimately fully independent. I must single out the recent work of Charles Musser for his attempt to understand the signifying process in early films in relation to the strategies involved in their presentation and production.

If the history of film as a commodity is necessary for a full understanding of film form in history, it is not the only means of approaching the film historically. We must develop methods of analysis of the films themselves which include a historical dimension. The investigation of film texts as systems had encouraged an approach that is rigorously synchronic. Certainly this synchronic investigation of films was necessarily the founding task of a structural approach to film. However the time has now come for a diachronic comparison of filmic systems within history. One particularly fruitful method in a diachronic approach to early film is the investigation of cine-genres.

Two limitations on the recent study of genre in film are immediately evident. The first is its almost exclusive attention to the aspect of content in films rather than expression (of signifieds rather than signifiers). This limitation I will discuss somewhat later. The other limitation is that, like so much of recent serious film study, it is cut off from history. This is perhaps not surprising since the description of genre synchronically should precede its diachronic investigation. There have, of course, been genre studies that traced the modification of particular genres, supplying something of a specialized history of the gangster film, or western. But the relation of such genres to film history in general has not been broached. This is surprising because there exists a conception of genre in which genre itself is a vehicle of historical change: the theory of genre of the Russian Formalists.

Although often criticized for removing the literary text from historical contexts, it is in fact in the theory of genres that the Russian Formalists introduced the historical dimension to the analysis of texts. The Formalist understanding of art as a process of de-familiarization gave to the history of art forms a necessity for constant change and renewal. As Tynyanov put it, «any literary succession is first of all a struggle, a destruction of old values and a reconstruction of new elements »/2. In this view literary genres become dynamic, competing with rival genres for dominance as they move through a cycle of origin, canonization and eventual decay. As a genre gains popularity it loses its defamiliarizing role and moves inevitably into decadence giving way to new forms/3.

Certainly this dynamic view of genres as part of the «dialectical self-creation of new forms »/4 has limitations as a model for film history. While it provides for a dynamic view of the succession of forms, its concept of «self-creation » limits our access to other historical factors which influence the growth and decay of genres, factors which are essential to our understanding of film as a commodity. The Formalists themselves were aware of the limitations of the approach, however, and Eichenbaum described it as «only a general outline of evolution surrounded by a whole series of complicated conditions »/5. But, if in need of completion by a consideration of these «complicated

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/2. Tynyanov quoted by Boris Eichenbaum in «The Theory of the 'Formal Method' » in *Russian Formalist Criticism*, ed. Lemon and Reis, Lincoln, Nebraska, 1965, p. 134.

/3. The Formalist approach to genre is discussed in the Eichenbaum essay cited above and is usefully summarized in «Literary History as a Challenge to Literary Theory » in *Towards an Aesthetic of Reception*, by Hans Robert Jauss, Minneapolis, 1982, pp. 16-18.

/4. Eichenbaum, *op. cit.*, p. 135.

/5. *Ibid.*, p. 136.

conditions » (which for me involves film as a commodity, primarily), nonetheless this concept allows us to grasp film genres as truly historical events. From this the conception of a historical series of film genres arises in which, to quote Hans Robert Jauss «the next work can solve formal and moral problems left behind by the last work, and present new problems in turn»/6.

We can now turn to the limitation of the concept of genres in recent film analysis to aspects of content. Although there are reasons why this has been useful in the approach to later cinema (in which the concept of genre is basically one taken over from policy of production and distribution within the industry: hence the categories of musical, gangster film, horror film, etc.), it also has limited our approach to genre as an aspect of the actual form of films. The Russian Formalist come to our aid again in their (admittedly preliminary) works on film, with the concept of «cine-genres»/7. Writing in the 'twenties, the Formalists were primarily concerned to establish what genres were uniquely cinematic as opposed to those «parasitically» taken over from literature and drama. For our purposes, however, the most important aspect of the concept of cine-genres is that it does not define genres simply in terms of content («Story» for the Formalists), but also in terms of its actualization as expression through the specific stylistic devices of film («Plot» for the Formalists). As A. Piotrovskij puts it: «We shall define a *cine-genre* as a complex of compositional, stylistic, and narrative devices, connected with specific semantic material and emotional emphasis but residing totally within a specific 'native' art system — the system of cinema. Therefore, in order to establish the 'cine-genres', it is necessary to draw specific conclusions from the basic stylistic laws of cine-art, the laws of 'photogeny' and 'montage'. We will observe how the use of 'space', 'time', 'people', and 'objects' varies from the point of view of montage and photogeny, depending on the genre. We will also observe how the narrative sequences are arranged, and what the inter-relations among all these elements are within a given cine-genre»/8.

This approach to genres is particularly useful in dealing with early cinema. This is partly because such «genres» as have already been discussed in early cinema — such as the chase film or the trick film — can partly be differentiated through their approaches to filmic space and time. Equally important is the way the genres of early cinema can

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/6. Jauss, *op. cit.*, p. 32.

/7. Russian Formalist writings on the cinema are found in *Russian Formalist Film Theory*, ed. Herbert Eagle, Ann Arbor, 1981. On genre, see particularly Tynjanov (Tynyanov) «On the Foundation of Cinema», p. 100 and «Towards a Theory of Cine-Genres» by A. Piotrovskij, pp. 131-146.

/8. Piotrovskij, *op. cit.*, pp. 131-132.

be placed in a historical series in which each succeeds the former in dominating the output of film manufacturers. Of course this pattern of succession is not absolute. As Shklovsky put it, «The vanquished line is not obliterated, it does not cease to exist. It is only knocked from the crest ; it lies dormant and may again rise as a perennial pretender to the throne »/9. Certainly competing cine-genres occur during this period. But there are clear patterns of dominance of production by different genres, which indicate the cycles of origin of a new genre, dominance and then decay within the film industry. (The description of these cycles is only at a preliminary stage in this essay. Detailed research into production records and catalogues, information on distribution and exhibition are necessary to establish them with certainty. The difference in the cycle of genres from country to country also needs to be investigated, although during this early period film has an international distribution that is unparallel in later history).

I will offer a description of four cine-genres during this early period (approximately 1895-1910) as a preliminary sketch for a theory of genres in early film. Certainly my discussion of these genres does not exhaust all existing genres during this period. But it does provide a framework into which other genres may be integrated (or which may be modified as other genres are defined and examined, or the patterns of succession changed by further research). My definition of genres depends primarily on their relation to the articulation between shots in terms of space and time. The first genre consists of narratives completed within a single shot. The second genre, which I term the genre of non-continuity, consists of a narrative in at least two shots, in which the disruption caused by the cut(s) between shots is used to express a disruption on the story level of the film. The third genre, which I refer to as the genre of continuity, consists of multi-shot narratives in which the discontinuity caused by cuts is de-emphasized by being bridged through a continuity of action on the story level. The fourth genre I call the genre of discontinuity, in which a multi-shot narrative conveys action which is continuous on the story level through a disruption caused by editing on the plot level.

The genre of single shot narrative can be said to be inaugurated by the earliest fiction films of Edison and Lumière, such as *L'Arroseur arrosé* (1895) or *Eloping by Horseback* (1898), and would include any film in which some narrative action is developed within a single shot. Most often the action of these films is comic, a gag pulled on an unsuspecting victim, for instance. Incidents of erotic display are also

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/9. Shklovsky, quoted in Eichenbaum, *op. cit.*, p. 135.

frequent in these single shot films, and a host of other sorts of action occur. It is somewhat surprising how long this genre lasted (in the U.S. the medium of penny arcade exhibition via mutoscopes may be a partial explanation of its longevity). As late as 1905 both Pathé and Biograph are still making films in this genre (e.g. Biograph's *A Rube in the Subway*\* and Pathé's *Le Bain du charbonnier*\*)/10. The genre appears to have been dominant (at least in number of films released) until about 1903.

The next genre, the narrative of non-continuity, is more complicated to describe. It does not simply indicate films which contain the elements of non-continuity that I described in my earlier article, since many of those devices appear in a number of genres. Rather, this genre indicates a particular approach to the joining of shots. The disruption caused by the move from one shot to another, rather than being minimized through the rules of continuity editing, is actually emphasized (and explained) by a discontinuity or disruption on the level of story. A clear example of this genre would be Smith's *Let Me Dream Again*\* (Great Britain, 1900) or its near copy, Zecca's *Rêve et réalité*\* (Pathé, 1901). In both these films the first shot shows a man drinking and flirting with a young girl. The second shot (linked in Smith's film by a blurring effect, and in Zecca's by a dissolve) shows the same man waking in bed next to his quite unattractive wife. In both films the transition between shots is used quite visibly to express a contrast in the film's story: the discontinuity between dreams and life.

There are many other narrative lines within this genre, with the many dream films which cut from reality to fantasy being perhaps the most numerous. The dynamics of this genre may explain why the dream is such a popular subject in early cinema, since the discontinuity it represents could both be conveyed by a cut between two shots and at the same time could naturalize the disruption of editing on the story level. But a number of other situations allowed similar strategies. The radical ellipses that express explosions and deaths in such films as Porter's *Another Job for the Undertaker*\* and *The Finish of Bridget Mc Keen*\* (both from 1901) deal similarly with the cut that bridges the two shots of each film. Porter's *What Happened in the Tunnel* (1903) also acknowledges the transition between two shots with a disruption on the story line. A fade out to black leader covers a kiss made in the darkness of a tunnel, but in the second shot the man discovers the women in the compartment have changed places and he is now kissing the wrong girl. Again this was a widely imitated gag in early cinema,

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/10. Films which are starred appear in the descriptive filmography *Cinema 1900/1906: A Analytical Study*, F.I.A.F., Volume II.

finding its proto-type in two 1899 British films by Smith and Bamforth, both entitled *A Kiss in the Tunnel* and a later French version, *Flirt en chemin de fer*\* (Pathé, 1903?).

There are numerous other films which seem strongly related to this genre and should perhaps be included within it. Most important would be the magic or trick film, and not simply because many trick films are presented as dreams. In most magic films the rupture utilized is not primarily that between separate shots, but a rupture created within shots, between frames or photograms. The effect of magical transformation achieved through stop motion is certainly that of a disruption which calls attention to itself and expresses a disruption on the story level — the magical ability of the sorcerer to transcend the laws of nature. Given the fuzzy differentiation between montage between shots and stop motion transformation (particularly with the revelation in the work of Jacques Malthête, John Frazer and André Gaudreault that in many cases such transformation were accomplished by splices as well as camera stoppage)/11, it would seem that the magic film should be included in this genre. Certain other forms, such as films which consist of a series of thematically linked tableaux without narrative links, such as Biograph's *The Four Seasons*\* (1904) relate strongly to this genre.

Apart from the trick film, it might be questioned how pervasive this genre is, and if it ever is truly dominant. It appears quite early but seems to fade away by 1904. Later trick films relate to it, of course, but after 1904 such films of transformation are most often multi-shot narratives that deal with the actual cuts between shots without expressing a disruption within the story. In many ways this genre of non-continuity blurs into a number of transitional or mixed genres which would include narratives (such as the many versions of the *Passion Play*) in which a series of tableaux function semi-independently. Each shot in these films is a sort of micro-narrative, showing a single location and a complete action. However, continuity of characters and, frequently, the audience's foreknowledge of the story/12 maintain a sort of sluggish continuity, rather than emphasizing the disruptions between shots. This tableaux style functions, then, as a sort of transition between the narrative of non-continuity and the next genre, the narrative of continuity.

The narrative of continuity is unquestionably later than the previous genres. It is exemplified by a form often noted as a « genre » in early film

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/11. See Malthête, « Méliès technicien du collage » and Gaudreault, « Théâtralité » et « narrativité » dans l'œuvre de Georges Méliès » both in *Méliès et la naissance du spectacle cinématographique*, ed. Madeleine Malthête-Méliès, and John Frazer, *Artificially Arranged Scenes*, Boston, G.K. Hall and Co., 1979.

/12. See Charles Musser « The Nickleodeon Era Begins » in *Framework*, Fall 1983.

— the chase film. In this genre the disruption of the cut is naturalized by a continuity within the story. Specifically this continuity is the actual movement of a character(s) that bridges the cuts. The end of one shot is signalled by characters leaving the frame, while the next shot is inaugurated by their reappearance. The disruption of the cut is, as it were, smoothed over by the continuity of the character's movement and the brief ellipsis of his action between shots is minimized rather than emphasized. We find proto-types of this sort of continuity in early multi-shot narratives, such as Méliès' *A Trip to the Moon*\* (1902), in which the tableaux form is modified by the departure from one location at the end of the shot and their arrival in the next locale in the following shots (not to mention the fully developed continuity of the sequence of the rocket's return to earth in Méliès' films)/13. But this form of continuity finds its complete expression in the chase film, in which the action of dashing from one locale to the next provides the narrative armature of the film.

Although there are proto-types of the chase form from as early as 1901 (Williamson's *Stop Thief!*\*), it becomes an important form about 1904 with such films as Biograph's *The Maniac Chase*\* and *Personal*\*. These films form a sort of template from which an enormous series of imitations and variations are produced over the next four years. The pattern is consistent: a character is chased by a group of characters from one location to the next, with each shot showing the character being chased at some distance from the pursuing mob, the shot held until first the pursued and then the pursuers exit from the frame. The next shot begins this movement through the frame over again. This continues until at some fairly arbitrary point the fleeing figure is captured. This form of narrative was extremely popular and appears in a large number of films. Its dominance is undoubtedly overdetermined, but its mastery of the problem of the disruption of the cut through a narrative continuity shows the way a genre responds to a formal issue raised by preceding genres.

The approach to continuity established by the chase film also allows a series of variations in which continuity of action over a series of cuts establishes a coherent synthetic geography. Films such as *Rescued by Rover*\* (Hepworth, Great Britain, 1905) are examples of this as is a sort of sub-genre of the narrative of continuity in which the gags of the single shot narratives are concatenated along the trajectory of a single character. These films present a series of linked vignettes as a character sets off a series of comic disasters along his route, as in Hepworth's *That Fatal Sneeze* (Great Britain, 1907), in which a man doused with

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/13. See Gaudreault, *op. cit.*





*Rescued by Rover* (Hepworth, 1905).

pepper by a mischievous child causes disorder as he sneezes explosively in a succession of locales. Films of this sort appear particularly frequently in 1907 and may signal a recognized need for variation from the chase format and the decline of the genre of continuity.

The fourth genre, the narrative of discontinuity, refers to the re-introduction of the disruption of the cut into situations similar to the chase form. This disruption on the level of plot rather than story comes with the introduction of parallel editing and its *locus classicus* is the last minute rescues found in the Biograph films of D.W. Griffith. The appearance of parallel editing represents a particularly important juncture in the history of early film for a number of reasons, not the least of which is its specification of temporal and spatial relations between shots. But in the context of the succession of genres it can be seen as a dialectical response to the genre of continuity represented by the chase film. The earliest clear examples of parallel editing appear around 1907 in such films as *The Runaway Horse* (Pathé, 1907) and *The Hundred to One Shot* (Vitagraph, 1906). Although there may be earlier examples, they remain too infrequent to signal anything other than the prototypes of a genre. It is only in 1908 and 1909 that a large number of films appear that make use of this editing pattern.

While the genre of continuity is based on the immediate continuation of an action interrupted in the previous shot, parallel editing interrupts this immediate continuity by interpellating another line of action. Griffith's first extended sequence of parallel editing in *The Fatal Hour* (1908) can exemplify this form. A woman detective has been tied up in front of a gun-clock contraption rigged to fire a bullet into her heart at twelve o'clock. Learning of this, the police rush off to rescue her before the gun goes off. The climactic shots proceed as follows :

Shot 10 : Along a country road, a carriage filled with police rushes towards the camera, exiting from the frame (a trajectory familiar from chase films).

Shot 11 : The woman detective bound and gagged in the crook's hideout. The clock hands move to 11 : 52.

Shot 12 : A different location on the same country road. The carriage again enters the frame and rushes past the camera.

Shot 13 : Return to the woman detective as the clock hands move to 11 : 57.

Parallel editing represents a discontinuity on the level of plot (the actual assembly of shots) that disrupts the continuity of action on the level of story (the carriage rushing down the road, the movement of the clock hands). By intertwining two lines of action, it literally suspends the outcome of each one, creating that device of narrative delay which is known as *suspense*.

By 1909 parallel editing has become dominant in such rush-to-the-rescue situations and has almost entirely displaced the older chase format. More than any other element of film syntax, it represents the transformation of film syntax that takes place during this period. With its specification of temporal/spatial relations, its effect of an omniscient point of view on action, it is exemplary of the techniques that begin to allow films to formulate works that aspire to the genres of the novel and drama. At this point the factors determining the cine-genres become quite complex, and the sort of series I have been describing would have to deal with a number of other factors, such as the influence of literary and dramatic genres, the move towards longer lengths of films, and the appearance of forms that use a variety of syntagmas in dealing with relation between shots. Undoubtedly the next major syntagma to be introduced would be that of the scene. The scene in this context would be defined as a series of shots which, rather than presenting a succession of locales, analyze and establish a single locale and the action within it. The key articulation in the scene would be the cut-in (or cut-out) in which successive shots overlap spatially. This would find its beginnings in the cut-ins to medium shots in such films as *Mary Jane's Mishap* (Smith, 1903), but becomes a dominant practice around 1912 (in such films as Griffith's *The Lady and the Mouse* or *A*

*Girl and Her Trust*). However it does not simply displace parallel editing, but seems to perform a different narrative role, so we can see that genre at this historical point needs to be re-theorized.

This sketch of a succession of genres needs further investigation in terms of the recognition of such genres by film-makers and audiences. If by genre we mean patterns that determine expectations aroused in audience and patterns followed by film-makers, more evidence of the way films were conceived by producers and understood by audiences is needed. The discussion during the lawsuit between Edison and Biograph over the film *Personal* shows a clear consciousness by the film-makers involved (Edwin S. Porter and Wallace McCutcheon and the companies Biograph and Edison) not only of the chase form but also of the genre of continuity as opposed to the single shot film/14. It is in this context that it is particularly clear that a theory of the succession of genres cannot rely on a treatment of the films exclusively.

Certainly other concerns within the corpus of films can supplement the foregoing sketch as well. The four genres I investigated derive from their approach to the articulation between shots. Although I think this is the most important aspect of cinematic plot during this period, there may be room for the consideration of genres based on other aspects of filmic discourse. Likewise consideration of genres outside of fictional narrative is needed. It is evident that at least in the early period of this era the dominant genre is, in fact, that of actualities. The sort of cinematic form given to these early actualities needs to be examined more closely in relation to the fictional genres I have discussed/15.

The discovery that early films were formulated in a different manner than later styles of film-making was an important insight. It allowed us to discover early film as a field of investigation in its own right, rather than as the infancy of an art form. The fact that this difference has been an inspiration to a number of recent avant-garde films is a part of the history of that difference/16. And, paradoxically, the fact that these

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/14. See David Levy, «Edison Sales Policy and the Continuous Action Film» in *Film before Griffith* ed. John Fell, and Gaudreault, *Récit scriptural, récit théâtral, récit filmique : prolégomènes à une théorie narratologique du cinéma* (unpublished doctoral thesis, Université de Paris III), pp. 244-248.

/15. David Levy's admirable «Re-constituted News Reels, Re-enactments and the American Narrative Film» in *Cinema 1900-1906* is an important beginning in this direction. This article appeared in French : «The Fake Train Robbery» : les reportages simulés, les reconstitutions et le film narratif américain », in *Les Cahiers de la Cinéma-thèque*, n°29.

/16. One can cite such films as Ken Jacobs *Tom Tom the Piper's Son*, Ernie Gehr's *Eureka* and Hollis Frampton's *Gloria* as obvious examples. But without direct reference to early cinema, many other films of the America Avant-Garde can be related to the anomalies of early cinema. See my article «An Unseen Energy Swallows Space : Early Film and the Avant Garde» in John Fell, ed., *op. cit.*

same early films are also the ancestors of later dominant practice is another part of the history of that difference. It is a difference that must haunt us and impell us to discover a method of historical investigation that can do it justice.

*L'histoire des débuts du cinéma doit faire l'objet d'une nouvelle théorisation qui puisse rendre compte de la différence du cinéma à ses débuts d'avec les modes de réalisation ultérieurs, et qui puisse aussi indiquer de quelle façon ces modes antérieurs sont historiquement reliés à la pratique dominante qui suivit. L'approche de la notion de genre par les Formalistes russes est ici proposée comme un moyen de décrire historiquement les débuts du cinéma. Pour eux, le genre est un processus dynamique de naissance, de domination et de décadence, dans lequel les genres rivalisent pour la domination.*

*En m'appuyant sur le concept formaliste de « ciné-genres » (qui sont définis aussi bien par leur façon d'utiliser les moyens cinématographiques d'expression, que par leur contenu narratif), je propose une succession de quatre genres pour les débuts du cinéma. Le premier est le genre des films narratifs à plan unique. J'appelle le second « genre de non-continuité » : narratif, il consiste en films narratifs d'au moins deux plans et dans lesquels la rupture causée par la coupure entre les deux plans exprime une rupture au plan de l'histoire racontée. J'appelle le genre suivant « genre de continuité », où une continuité de l'action recouvre la coupure, comme par exemple dans le film-poursuite. Le dernier genre est celui de la discontinuité dans lequel les actions qui sont continues au plan de l'histoire sont discontinues dans leur représentation, comme dans les séquences en montage alterné.*