

Cuts & Transitions in Poetry Film

– Training Notes

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I'll be covering, what they are, the different types, what they achieve, how they're used and some of the technical aspects of achieving very beautiful and successful transitions.

Visual language and words generate ideas

- The order and spacing of words matter in a poem.
- Likewise, the order and timing of images are important in a film.
- Build your film like you build a written poem
- How does the line in your poem end? I don't just mean literally. . ! ?
- This can determine the duration of the shot sequence,
- and, how quickly it's cut,
- and, the transition to the next sequence.

Transitions play an important role in poetry film

- They do more than just link two sections of footage or two images together.
- A transition isn't nothing – it's a location, and/or
- a boundary between two things: locations, objects, emotional changes, rhythmic changes, shifts, turns, and so on.
- and, a transition can enable the audience to connect by taking a pause.

In poetry film transitions are mostly understood as the link between two pieces of footage, in order to ease the viewer from one image to the next, sometimes one line of poetry to to the next. (Whereas in film a transition may be a whole scene – the scene from Lord of the Rings is an example.)

The period of change can happen gradually, with a dissolve, or immediately, with a cut.

Types of transitions

The most commonly used transitions in poetry film are:

- a cut
- a dissolve
- a fade in and out

Each type is used differently.

We'll look at cuts first

Although whether a cut is an actual transition could be discussed, but for now we'll include it as such because it is a way of moving from one clip to the next, and it can generate particular effects.

- The cut (or straight cut as it is sometimes called) is used when you want to move immediately from clip to clip.
- It represents a clear continuity in setting and/or time.
- The cut itself gives limited visual meaning but keeps the whole poetry film moving along.
- A quick collage of cuts can be used or can be more gently paced, depending on the pace that you want to achieve. And you can mix the pacing very effectively.

Examples of the use of cuts

- Cuts can appear while there is movement between clips.
- Cutting to a close up shot of the same scene, which can add information, and focus the viewer on something significant.
- Back and forth between different locations. Which can often, but not always, be happening at the same time.

Examples of these are in the video.

- Where there are changes in the perspective. Seen throughout the The Decline of Gondor scene from Lord of the Rings
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FlkDhaLgNDs>
- Cuts of various lengths can be used to create repetition and flashes (example Marc Neys Harvest Moon <https://vimeo.com/80791574>).
- Matching regular cuts to the rhythm of the soundtrack (example Marie Craven's Dictionary Illustrations <https://vimeo.com/165667078>).

Dissolves and a Fades

- A dissolve is a gradual transition from one image to the next. The first image begins to disappear as the second image gradually appears (sometimes called cross-dissolve).
- A fade-in or fade-out is where an image dissolves into a colour or appears from a colour - usually black or white.

The length of the dissolve or fade is dictated by the mood or pacing you want to create.

When is Dissolve used?

Just like a cut, a dissolve can convey a passage of time or, a change of place.

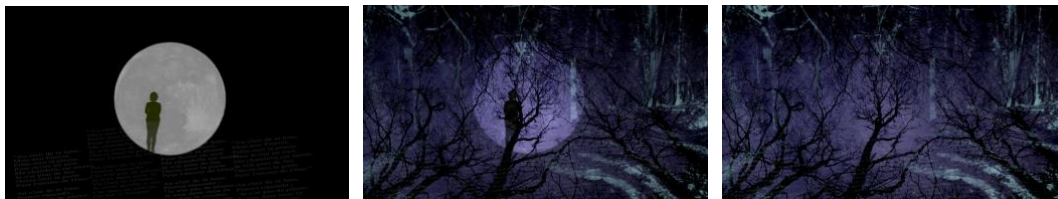
Also, like a cut, it tells the audience that the shots belong together in a sequence and that the story remains consistent from one shot to the next.

- It can slow down the thought process and match the pacing and tone of the poem.
- A dissolve is often used to express emotion as it contains a fluidity – the viewer let's go emotionally. Allows a chance to breath.
- As images overlap, dissolves can be used to convey a deeper meaning or something surreal or abstract.

What particularly interests me in dissolve transitions is that for however long two images overlap, a third shot is created.

That third shot can add resonance to the juxtaposition of the images

Some examples:



Moonbather a poetry film I made with the poet Katie Griffiths is a poetry film with some mystery. This transition (seen in the images above) comes at one of the main turns in the poem with the words “sister shake out your limbs”. At which point the figure is seen in the treetops silhouetted against the moon, the vocal *Au Clair de la lune* begins, and the music moves up an octave and becomes more energetic, and at this point the forest changes and becomes like a fairy tale.

<https://helendewbery.com/film-poems/moonbather/>

The next one is quite different. It's from Frog on Water which was made for the Wild Whispers project. The screen is split into two. And the transition in the frame on the right gives a disturbing sense of change and loss, and memory which is in the poem.



And this split screen also, I think, shows that there is a relationship between thinking about transitions and cuts and thinking about how you might compose a split screen.
<https://helendewbery.com/film-poems/frog-on-water/>

Dissolves can also Enhance an Emotional Effect



Neap Tide is a poem by Abigail Morley about a child not being there. I wanted the dissolves to add emotional impact. But also, the materiality of the dissolves became in effect a barrier to reaching and touching what might have been.
<https://helendewbery.com/film-poems/neap-tide/>

Dissolves typically last one to two seconds

- Which equates to give or take 24–30 frames generally - but can be made much longer if the software allows and if the footage is long enough.
- The duration that the two images overlap significantly influences the effect of the dissolve. A short dissolve conveys energy and speed, whereas a longer dissolve gives more time for reflection and contemplation.
- Overlays, where two or more images are on top of one another on the timeline with the use of the opacity tool so that images below can be seen through - can also act like dissolves.

For Endlings a film I made with Angela France, I researched Thylacines, passenger pigeons, tattered butterflies, and Laughing Owls – which are all extinct. With the words of the poem in my head I laid down in a field imagining I was looking at ‘the Forest Thrush, circle the sky/possessed/by an older, greater need and scarred/by hope’. The result in the film was a complex system of delicate overlays that see through the generations, that lose and gain hope, and that, as the last line states: ‘weeps for the want of an ark’.
<https://helendewbery.com/film-poems/endlings-a-poem-by-angela-france/>

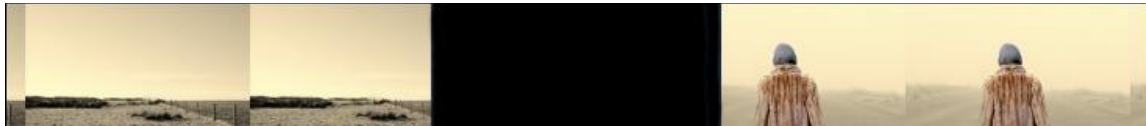
Fades

When to use a Black fade or when to use a white fade? Both have different uses.

We've already said that:

- A black screen is not simply nothing
- It's a boundary, a location.

A black fade halts the momentum and disconnects the two scenes – a bit like stage curtains. In it the viewer is forced to contemplate what they've just seen.



On the other hand, a white screen is a bridge, rather than a boundary, and invites the viewer to keep on with the story.



The differences are subtle, but they are there.

Sound as a transition

Sound can be used in addition to a black or a white fade.

- Maybe creating something that isn't there, such as a screeching owl as night falls. You don't see it on the screen, but you hear it during the transition.
- Creating atmosphere to enhance emotion or tension – such as erratic breathing, heartbeat, a murmuring crowd.
- And music – I say more about the use of music in another lesson.

I've just said that a black screen disconnects the two scenes - but the exception is when a sound transition is added.

Achieving Successful Transitions is very satisfying but also not necessarily easy.

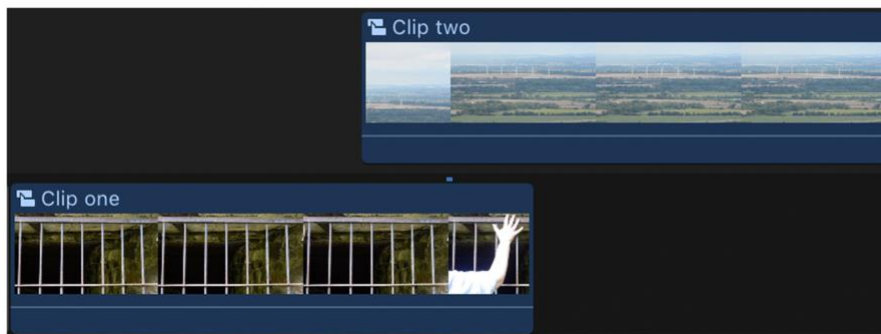
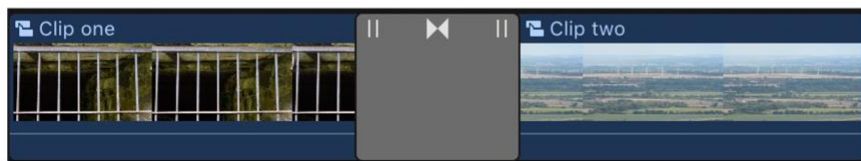
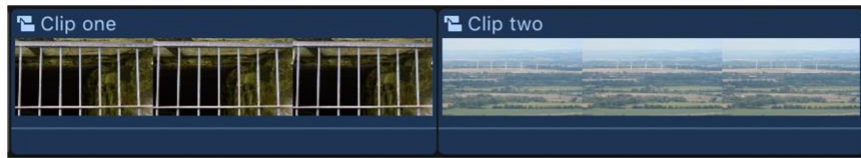
These are some of the things to consider.

- ① The point at which you cut from one clip to the next should be carefully thought out. This is the case for cuts, dissolves and fades.
- ② One clip should lead to the next clip seamlessly and the viewer should not usually be made aware of the transition. Unless you consciously wish for the transition to be seen as a part of the film.
- ③ Don't forget that transitions are a tool, helping to move the narrative along, or convey a mood, a tone or pace.
- ④ One approach is to look at your poem and identify where the significant moments are and how you might express them as a transition – look for the shifts, punctuation, transitional words etc. You'll find that some transitions will be more important than others.
- ⑤ The approach in some ways could be compared to a musician writing a musical score for a film – they will be looking at how they can express the significant moments of a film in music.
- ⑥ If your images aren't similar, think about how they will merge – imagining them as pictures side by side on a wall may help.
- ⑦ Think about the movement in both clips – will it jar when the two are brought together? Does the eye follow the motion?

Making a Dissolve

It's important to understand that when making a dissolve it will use footage that you may well have removed from your clip.

This first image is a typical timeline of two images that could be used with a straight cut. In the next image a dissolve has been added.



The third image shows how sections of footage that you have removed will be put back into play to create the dissolve - and will show up in the film.

In this example I had removed the arm at the end of clip one and the shaky footage at the start of clip two. But you can see from this image that by adding the dissolve the transition will bring it back in.

Look very carefully, at what you're seeing from the fading clips, so that you don't end up showing parts of the clip that you didn't want to show in the first place.

- You need enough 'perfect' footage to create a dissolve transition, as you are essentially adding time to the end of one clip and the beginning of the other, so that there is footage to fade in and out.
- And this is one of the very good reasons to always record longer footage than you think you'll need!

Audio

Don't forget about audio when you create a transition. You don't want the audio to make your transitions messy or confusing. Sometimes the viewer can miss a word, or even a line, during a transition.

Edit the audio clip separately, and really listen, as well as look, to what's happening.

Transition checklist



When doing your final editing a transitions checklist may help.

- Do they lead seamlessly from one clip to the next?
- Do any cross dissolves take up footage that you didn't want to use?
- Do they match compositions within the frame?
- Do they serve the film?
- Are there too many different types of transition?
- Is it the right transition at the right time?
- Is any camera movement clashing with a transition?
- With the sound on – do any of the transitions clash with the sound?

Finally,

Transitions are a creative choice and so use them at appropriate times and in ways that serve the film.

Get the right transition at the right time.

Remembering that transitions that work well take time.