

Analysis of a Sequence from Birth of a Nation

By 1915, silent cinema used a structure or framework by the way filmmakers aided the narrative of their movies with the use of certain narrative devices such as intertitles, continuity editing, and key aspects of mise en scene. With a close analysis of a sequence from the film Birth of a Nation (Directed by D.W. Griffith, USA, 1915), I will emphasize these points of discussion. The scene we shall be looking at is the assassination of president Abraham Lincoln.

The sequence starts with an opening intertitle, which sets up an establishing shot or long shot for Fords Theatre. Titles convey story information; and in the case of Birth of a Nation, historical facts, they are a form of narrative discourse that was often used in early cinema as a form of establishing shot followed by the actual long shot. The titles here, not only tell us that it is a gala performance to celebrate the surrender of General Lee and that brother and sister Elsie and Phillip Stoneman are present, but also tells us an historical fact, that the theatre on that fateful night, is exact in size and detail as it was then. A jump cut follows and we see an iris shot at the bottom hand side of the screen. Iris shot's were used here specifically to allow you, the audience, to focus in on the main subject in question. Here in this medium iris shot we see the young Stoneman's as they take their theatre seats. As they both sit the iris begins to expand slowly to reveal the establishing shot of the theatre, it's stage and audience in all its grandeur. The audience is made up of wealthy, well-dressed men and women told to us by the way the costumes have been picked for this scene. The camera angle then changes from looking down at the stage and the back of the Stoneman's to showing a medium frontal shot of them both, this breakdown is called analytical editing, we see that Elsie is looking through a pair of theatre binoculars. We ask ourselves 'what is she watching?' then an intertitle immediately follows this shot, telling us the name and star of the play that they are about to watch. The curtain then rises to the applause from the audience and we see Elsie Stoneman clapping with delight. A cut in to the stage as we see the performers in a full shot and lead actress steps forward to receive several bunches of flowers being passed from a man in the audience. An intertitle follows telling us the time and the arrival of the president, his wife, and party.

There then follows a medium shot of the theatre stairway, and we see men and women coming up the stairs to the balcony box closely followed by Abraham Lincoln. Cut to Abraham Lincoln taking his stand in the presidential box while the Stoneman's look up from the audience in an eye line match shot. The eye line match is used to point out the continuity editing practice, in other words, what the spectator looks at off screen the next cut, we as the audience, see what they are looking at. An establishing shot follows of the audience as they cheer, clap and wave as president Lincoln takes his seat. An intertitle follows telling us that the president's bodyguard takes his post outside of the presidential box and we see the bodyguard take his seat in the shadow of the hallway. We cut back to another establishing shot of the audience, followed by a cut to the presidents box as Lincoln looks off screen to the right in another example of continuity editing and acknowledges a group of the audience clapping and waving. We then see a different angled shot that allows us to see both the audience and the president's box at the same time with the use of analytical editing (long shot of the audience, to a smaller frame shot of the audience) Another cut in shot of the stage and actors followed by an intertitle telling us that the bodyguard leaves his post to get a better view of the play and we see him open the door and take his chair onto the balcony next along from the presidents box and as he sits the camera iris moves in to highlight his position. Cut to an intertitle, which tells us the time and that the play is into act 111, scene 2.

An iris shot on the right hand side of the screen is revealing the presidential booth and balcony, we see Elsie Stoneman looking up at the balcony

and signalling to her brother and asking 'who is that man up there?' Cut to another intertitle that tells us the man is John Wilkes Booth. We immediately cut to an iris shot of a menacing John Wilkes Booth, arms folded with a glaring look. This type of shot is known as proxemic patterning, it's the way a character signifies a meaning without words, in this case it's from his glare first into the audience and then second into the presidential box. Again a cut to the balcony establishing that this is where John Wilkes Booth is sitting, then back to that glaring iris shot of him looking all around. A cut in to the stage play followed by, a medium shot in the president's box, of Lincoln's reaction to the play, then back to the iris shot of Booth. This continuity editing sets out to tell us, as the audience, that John Wilkes Booth is watching the president and everyone else but the play itself. We then see an iris shot of the balcony as a figure gets up and heads for the door, a close up shot of the balcony reveals John Wilkes Booth slipping past unnoticed the president's bodyguard who is avidly watching and enjoying the play. Cut to the door opening onto the hallway and John Wilkes Booth in the shadows, peering into the keyhole of the president's box. He steps back, a full shot of Booth is revealed in the light of the hallway as he pulls out a gun, with a close up iris shot on the gun, he pulls back the trigger with his thumb, moves towards the door, turns the handle and enters.

Behind president Lincoln from the shadows, Booth creeps up towards him as the unaware Lincoln watches the play below him. A cut in to the stage reveals the actors who are engaging the full attention of the president. A cut back to the presidents box and Booth is now standing right behind him, the gun is fired as a puff of smoke is released, the people sitting next to the president leap up from there seats as the president collapses and Booth pushes past. Cut to a long shot of the theatre and audience as Booth leaps down onto the stage and with a fist punching the air proclaims the words "Sic semper tyrannis!" as we see in the following intertitle. A cut in to the stage for a closer shot of Booth, running into the background as a spotlight chases him. A shot to the presidential balcony shows us an hysterical commotion, followed by cut in to the audience and we see the Stoneman's just begin to realise what has happened, they stand to their feet in disbelief. We see a long shot of the theatre and all hell has broken loose, at the bottom of the screen we see it is too much for Elsie to take and she faints into her brother's arms while all around them the audience panics. On stage a man climbs the US flag (probably a doctor) up to the presidential box, once there in the next shot of the presidential box we see him leap to Lincoln's side, but its too late. Once again a form of analytical editing we see a smaller frame shot, or a cut in of the panic stricken crowd below the presidential box and the balcony next door. A last establishing shot of the audience reveals the Stoneman's leaving at the bottom of our screens as a long fade reaches black when they have left the frame. Slow fades that were generally used in this way were meant for the audience to think about what they had just witnessed on screen and allow them to digest the subject matter. An immediate cut to the president's box shows us the president being lifted back into the shadows, followed by another slow fade to black, end of scene.

In general, up to this period in silent cinema the directors tended to use very basic shots, many containing fixed camera shots to convey the story you were watching therefore cinema was very much like a stage play with actors moving in and out of the camera frame, this type of story telling limited the narrative. The scene we have just looked at was very complex, historically correct in its layout it was analysing historical events in American history with the use of intertitles, continuity editing and mise-en-scene that without these techniques in place would have proved too difficult. These narrative devices used in Birth of a Nation were set as standard for other films to follow.

