2 Frame and shot, framing and cutting

1 The first level: frame, set or closed system

We will start with very simple definitions, even though they may have to be corrected later. We will call the determination of a closed system, a relatively closed system which includes everything which is present in the image - sets, characters and props - framing. The frame therefore forms a set which has a great number of parts, that is of elements, which themselves form sub-sets. It can be broken down. Obviously these parts are themselves in image [en image]. This is why Jakobson calls them object-signs, and Pasolini 'cinemes'. However this terminology suggests comparisons with language (cinemes would be very like phonemes, and the shot would be like a moneme) which do not seem necessary. For, if the frame has an analogue, it is to be found in an information system rather than a linguistic one. The elements are the data [données], which are sometimes very numerous, sometimes of limited number. The frame is therefore inseparable from two tendencies: towards saturation or towards rarefaction. The big screen and depth of field in particular have allowed the multiplication of independent data, to the point where a secondary scene appears in the foreground while the main one happens in the background (Wyler), or where you can no longer even distinguish between the principal and the secondary (Altman). On the other hand, rarefied images are produced, either when the whole accent is placed on a single object (in Hitchcock, the glass of milk lit from the inside, in Suspicion; the glowing cigarette end in the black rectangle of the window in Rear Window) or when the set is emptied of certain sub-sets (Antonioni's deserted landscapes; Ozu's vacant interiors). The highest degree of rarefaction seems to be attained with the empty set, when the screen becomes completely black or completely white. Hitchcock gives an example of this in Spellbound, when another glass of milk invades the screen, leaving only an empty white image. But, from either side - whether rarefaction or saturation - the frame teaches us that the image is not just given to be seen. It is legible as well as visible. The frame has the implicit function of recording not merely sound information, but also visual information. If we see very few things in an image, this is because we do not know how to read it properly; we evaluate its rarefaction as badly as its saturation. There is a pedagogy of the image, especially with Godard, when this function is made explicit, when the frame serves as an opaque surface of information, sometimes blurred by saturation, sometimes reduced to the empty set, to the white or black screen.2

In the second place, the frame has always been geometrical or physical, depending on whether it constitutes the closed system in relation to chosen coordinates or in relation to selected variables. The frame is therefore sometimes conceived of as a spatial composition of parallels and diagonals, the constitution of a receptacle such that the blocs [masses] and the lines of the image which come to occupy it will find an equilibrium and their movements will find an invariant. It is often like this in Dreyer; Antonioni seems to go to the limit of this geometric conception of the frame which preexists that which is going to be inserted within it (Eclipse).3 Sometimes the frame is conceived as a dynamic construction in act [en acte], which is closely linked to the scene, the image, the characters and the objects which fill it. The iris method in Griffith, which isolates a face first of all, then opens and shows the surroundings; Eisenstein's researches inspired by Japanese drawing, which adapt the frame to the theme; Gance's variable screen which opens and closes 'according to the dramatic necessities', and like a 'visual accordion' - from the very beginning attempts were made to test dynamic variations of the frame. In any case framing is limitation.4 But, depending on the concept itself the limits can be conceived in two ways, mathematically or dynamically: either as preliminary to the existence of the bodies whose essence they fix, or going as far as the power of existing bodies goes. For ancient philosophy, this was one of the principal features of the opposition between the Platonists and the Stoics.

The frame is also geometric or physical in another way - in relation to the parts of the system that it both separates and brings together. In the first case, the frame is inseparable from rigid geometric distinctions. A very fine image in Griffith's Intolerance cuts the screen along a vertical which corresponds to a 'wall of the ramparts of Babylon; whilst on the right one sees the king advancing on a higher horizontal, a high walk of the ramparts; on the left the chariots enter and leave, on a lower horizontal, through the gates of the city. Eisenstein studied the effects of the golden section on cinematographic imagery; Dreyer explored horizontals and verticals, symmetries, the high and the low, alternations of black and white; the Expressionists developed diagonals and counter-diagonals, pyramidal or triangular...
figures which agglomerate bodies, crowds, places, the collision of these masses, a whole paving of the frame ‘which takes on a form like the black and white squares of a chess-board’ (Lang’s The Nibelungen and Metropolis). Even light is the subject of a geometrical optic, when it is organised with shadows into two halves, or into alternating rays, as is done by one Expressionist tendency (Wiener, Lang). The lines separating the great elements of Nature obviously play a fundamental role, as in Ford’s skies: the separation of earth and sky, the earth pushed down to the base of the screen. But it also involves water and earth, or the slender line which separates air and water, when water hides an escapee in its depths, or drowns a victim at the limit of the surface (Le Roy’s I Am a Fugitive from a Chain Gang and Newman’s Sometimes a Great Notion). As a general rule, the powers of Nature are not framed in the same way as people or things, and individuals are not framed in the same way as crowds, and sub-elements are not framed in the same way as terms, so that there are many different frames in the frame. Doors, windows, box office windows, skylights, car windows, mirrors, are all frames in frames. The great directors have particular affinities with particular–secondary, tertiary, etc. frames. And it is by this dovetailing of frames that the parts of the set or of the closed system are separated, but also converge and are reunited.

On the other hand, the physical or dynamic conception of the frame produces imprecise sets which are now only divided into zones or bands. The frame is no longer the object of geometric divisions, but of physical gradations. The parts of the set are now intensive parts, and the set itself is a mixture which is transmitted through all the parts, through all the degrees of shadow and of light, through the whole light–darkness scale (Wegener, Murnau). This was the Expressionist optic’s other tendency, although some directors, both inside and outside Expressionism, participate in both. It is the hour when it is no longer possible to distinguish between sunrise and sunset, air and water, water and earth, in the great mixture of a marsh or a tempest. Here, it is by degrees of mixing that the parts become distinct or confused in a continual transformation of values. The set cannot divide into parts without qualitatively changing each time: it is neither divisible nor indivisible, but ‘dividual’ [dividual]. Admittedly this was already the case in the geometric conception – there the dovetailing of frames indicated the qualitative changes. The cinematographic image is always dividual. This is because, in the final analysis, the screen, as the frame of frames, gives a common standard of measurement to things which do not have one – long shots of countryside and close-ups of the face, an astronomical system and a single drop of water – parts which do not have the same denominator of distance, relief or light. In all these senses the frame ensures a detrimentalisation of the image.

In the fourth place, the frame is related to an angle of framing. This is because the closed set is itself an optical system which refers to a point of view on the set of parts. Of course, the point of view can be or appear to be – bizarre or paradoxical: the cinema shows extraordinary points of view – at ground level, or from high to low, from low to high, etc. But they seem to be subject to a pragmatic rule which is not just valid for the narrative cinema: to avoid falling into an empty aestheticism they must be explained, they must be revealed as normal and regular – either from the point of view of a more comprehensive set which includes the first, or from the point of view of an initially unseen, not given, element of the first set. In Jean Mitry we find a description of a sequence which is exemplary here (Lubitsch’s The Man I Killed): the camera, in a lateral mid–height travelling shot, shows a row of spectators seen from behind and tries to glide to the front, then stops at a one–legged man whose missing leg provides a vista on the scene, a passing military parade. It thus frames the good leg, the crutch, and, under the stump, the parade. Here we have an eminently bizarre angle of framing. But another shot shows another cripple behind the first, one with no legs at all, who sees the parade in precisely this way, and who actualises or accomplishes the preceding point of view. It can therefore be said that the angle of framing was justified. However, this pragmatic rule is not always valid, or even when it is valid, it is not the whole story. Bonitzer has constructed the interesting concept of ‘deframing’ [décadrage] in order to designate these abnormal points of view which are not the same as an oblique perspective or a paradoxical angle, and refer to another dimension of the image. We find examples of this in Dreyer’s cutting frames: faces cut by the edge of the screen in the Passion of Joan of Arc. But, we see it even more in empty spaces like those of Ozu, which frame a dead zone, or in disconnected spaces as in Bresson, whose parts are not connected and are beyond all narrative or more generally pragmatic justification, perhaps tending to confirm that the visual image has a legible function beyond its visible function.

There remains the out–of–field [hors–champ]. This is not a negation; neither is it sufficient to define it by the non–coincidence between two frames, one visual and the other sound (for example, in Bresson, when the sound testifies to what is not seen, and ‘relays’ the visual
instead of duplicating it). The out-of-field refers to what is neither seen nor understood, but is nevertheless perfectly present. This presence is indeed a problem and itself refers to two new conceptions of framing. If we return to Bazin’s alternative of mask or frame, we see that sometimes the frame works like a mobile mask according to which every set is extended into a larger homogeneous set with which it communicates, and sometimes it works as a pictorial frame which isolates a system and neutralises its environment. This duality is most clearly expressed in Renoir and Hitchcock; in the former space and action always go beyond the limits of the frame which only takes elements from an area; in the latter the frame ‘confines all the components’, and acts as a frame for a tapestry rather than one for a picture or a play. But, if a partial set only communicates formally with its out-of-field through the positive characteristics of the frame and the reframing, it is none the less true that a system which is closed – even one which is very closed up – only apparently suppresses the out-of-field, and in its own way gives it an even more decisive importance. All framing determines an out-of-field. There are not two types of frame only one of which would refer to the out-of-field; there are rather two very different aspects of the out-of-field, each of which refers to a mode of framing.

The divisibility of content means that the parts belong to various sets, which constantly subdivide into sub-sets or are themselves the sub-set of a larger set, on to infinity. This is why content is defined both by the tendency to constitute closed systems and by the fact that this tendency never reaches completion. Every closed system also communicates. There is always a thread to link the glass of sugared water to the solar system, and any set whatever to a larger set. This is the first sense of what we call the out-of-field: when a set is framed, therefore seen, there is always a larger set, or another set with which the first forms a larger one, and which can in turn be seen, on condition that it gives rise to a new out-of-field, etc. The set of all these sets forms a homogeneous continuity, a universe or a plane [plan] of genuinely unlimited content. But it is certainly not a ‘whole’ although this plane or these larger and larger sets necessarily have an indirect relationship with the whole. We know the insoluble contradictions we fall into when we treat the set of all sets as a whole. It is not because the notion of the whole is devoid of sense; but it is not a set and does not have parts. It is rather that which prevents each set, however big it is, from closing in on itself, and that which forces it to extend itself into a larger set. The whole is therefore like thread which traverses sets and gives each one the possibility, which is necessarily realised, of communicating with another, to infinity. Thus the whole is the Open, and relates back to time or even to spirit rather than to content and to space. Whatever their relationship, one should therefore not confuse the extension of sets into each other with the opening of the whole which passes into each one. A closed system is never absolutely closed; but on the one hand it is connected in space to other systems by a more or less ‘fine’ thread, and on the other hand it is integrated or reintegrated into a whole which transmits a duration to it along this thread. Hence, it is perhaps not sufficient to distinguish, with Burch, a concrete space from an imaginary space in the out-of-field, the imaginary becoming concrete when it in turn passes into a field, when it thus ceases to be out-of-field. In itself, or as such, the out-of-field already has two qualitatively different aspects: a relative aspect by means of which a closed system refers in space to a set which is not seen, and which can in turn be seen, even if this gives rise to a new unseen set, on to infinity; and an absolute aspect by which the closed system opens on to a duration which is immanent to the whole universe, which is no longer a set and does not belong to the order of the visible. Deframings [décadrages] which are not ‘pragmatically’ justified refer to precisely this second aspect as their raison d’être.

In one case, the out-of-field designates that which exists elsewhere, to one side or around; in the other case, the out-of-field testifies to a more disturbing presence, one which cannot even be said to exist, but rather to ‘insist’ or ‘subsist’, a more radical Elsewhere, outside homogeneous space and time. Undoubtedly these two aspects of the out-of-field intermingle constantly. But, when we consider a framed image as a closed system, we can say that one aspect prevails over the other, depending on the nature of the ‘thread’. The thicker the thread which links the seen set to other unseen sets the better the out-of-field fulfils its first function, which is the adding of space to space. But, when the thread is very fine, it is not content to reinforce the closure of the frame or to eliminate the relation with the outside. It certainly does not bring about a complete isolation of the relatively closed system, which would be impossible. But, the finer it is – the further duration descends into the system like a spider – the more effectively the out-of-field fulfils its other function which is that of introducing the transpatial and the spiritual into the system which is never perfectly closed. Dreyer made this into an ascetic method: the more the image is spatially closed, even reduced to two dimensions, the greater is its capacity to open itself on to a fourth dimension which is time, and on to a fifth which is Spirit, the spiritual decision of Jeanne
or Gertrud. When Claude Ollier defines Antonioni's geometric frame, he not only says that the awaited character is not yet visible (the first function of the out-of-field) but also that he is momentarily in a zone of emptiness, 'white on white which is impossible to film', and truly invisible (the second function). And, in another way, Hitchcock's frames are not content to neutralise the environment, to push the closed system as far as possible and to enclose the maximum number of components in the image; at the same time they make the image into a mental image, open (as we will see) on to a play of relations which are purely thought and which weave a whole. This is why we said that there is always out-of-field, even in the most closed image. And that there are always simultaneously the two aspects of the out-of-field: the actualisable relation with other sets, and the virtual relation with the whole. But in the one case the second relation – the most mysterious – is reached indirectly, on to infinity, through the intermediary and the extension of the first, in the succession of images; in the other case it is reached more directly, in the image itself, and by limitation and neutralisation of the first.

Let us summarise the results of this analysis of the frame. Framing is the art of choosing the parts of all kinds which became part of a set. This set is a closed system, relatively and artificially closed. The closed system determined by the frame can be considered in relation to the data that it communicates to the spectators: it is 'informatic', and saturated or rarefied. Considered in itself and as limitation, it is geometric or dynamic-physical. Considered in the nature of its parts, it is still geometric or physical and dynamic. It is an optical system when it is considered in relation to the point of view, to the angle of framing: it is then pragmatically justified, or lays claim to a higher justification. Finally, it determines an out-of-field, sometimes in the form of a larger set which extends it, sometimes in the form of a whole into which it is integrated.

2 The second level: shot and movement

Cutting [découpage] is the determination of the shot, and the shot, the determination of the movement which is established in the closed system, between elements or parts of the set. But we have seen that movement also concerns a whole which is qualitatively different from the set. The whole is that which changes – it is the open or duration. Movement thus expresses a change of the whole, or a stage, an aspect of this change, a duration or an articulation of duration.

Thus movement has two facets, as inseparable as the inside and the outside, as the two sides of a coin: it is the relationship between parts and it is the state [affection] of the whole. On the one hand it modifies the respective positions of the parts of a set, which are like its sections [coupes], each one immobile in itself; on the other it is itself the mobile section of a whole whose change it expresses. From one point of view, it is called relative; from the other, it is called absolute. Take a fixed shot where the characters move: they modify their respective positions in a framed set; but this modification would be completely arbitrary if it did not also express something in the course of changing, a qualitative alteration, even a minute one, in the whole which passes through this set. Take a shot where the camera moves: it can go from one set to another, modifying the respective position of sets. All this is necessary only if relative modification expresses an absolute change of the whole which is transmitted through these sets.

For example, the camera follows a man and a woman who climb a staircase and arrive at a door that the man opens; then the camera leaves them, and draws back in a single shot. It runs along the external wall of the apartment, comes back to the staircase that it descends backwards, coming out on to the pavement, and rises up the exterior up to the opaque window of the apartment seen from outside. This movement, which modifies the relative position of immobile sets, is only necessary if it expresses something in the course of happening, a change in the whole which is itself transmitted through these modifications: the woman is being murdered. She went in free, but cannot expect any help – the murder is inexorable. We could say that this example (Hitchcock's *Frenzy*) is a case of ellipsis in the narration.

But, whether there is ellipsis or not, or even whether there is narration or not, does not matter for the moment. What counts in these examples is that the shot, of whatever kind, has as it were two poles: in relation to the sets in space where it introduces relative modifications between elements or sub-sets; in relation to a whole whose absolute change in duration it expresses. This whole is never content to be elliptical, nor narrative, though it can be. But the shot, of whatever kind, always has these two aspects: it presents modifications of relative position in a set or some sets. It expresses absolute changes in a whole or in the whole. The shot in general has one face turned towards the set, the modifications of whose parts it translates, and another face turned towards the whole, of which it expresses the – or at least a – change. Hence the situation of the shot, which can be defined abstractly as the intermediary between the framing of the set and the montage of the whole, sometimes tending