The evolution of film language

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The very first films began and ended with the one shot, over the space of a handful of minutes, with a fixed camera capturing theatrical action:

> LUMIÈRE BROTHERS
> L'Arroseur Arrosé (1895):
> http://www.dailymotion.com/video/k4nHvzt5haRjs6dF7rh

…and yet already showing us that film time runs on different, if sometimes parallel, tracks:
> Démolition d'un Mur (1896):
> http://www.dailymotion.com/video/kX9EAOKFj302AidF7sX

By joining together self-contained sequences, Georges Méliès created longer films than the Lumières did, and yet the sequences were distinct from each other, and could have each served as a Lumière short in their own right. Still Méliès was conscious that time could be manipulated for trick effects:

> GEORGES MÉLIÈS
> Le Voyage Dans La Lune (1902):
> http://www.dailymotion.com/video/k2xC7szcT94iAwdF8ds

Edwin S Porter was possibly the first to manipulate space on film to show us various aspects of the narrative as they unfolded in different locations. In these two versions of the same film, you can clearly see the difference brought about by the change in filmic mind-set. In the first, action happening at the burning house is seen first from within, and then all over again from outside the house. In the second version, cross-cutting, or elliptical editing, economises on the time needed to narrate the same story, by showing us the salient aspects of the actions happening within and without the house, by cutting between the two points of view:

> EDWIN S PORTER
> Life of an American Fireman (1903)
> Library of Congress Version:
> http://www.dailymotion.com/video/k6KU5AQD95bLmsdFcse
> Cross-Cut Version:

…and in the subsequent film, Porter capitalises on elliptical editing to narrate a fast-moving story happening across several locations:

The Great Train Robbery (1903):

David Wark Griffith represented a water-shed not only in the length of films he made in his later years (three hours, in the example below) but in the refined level of language used to create those films. So whilst we tend to view the practitioners above as film pioneers, with Griffith we have the first true filmmaker – someone who developed a new language of cinema, harnessing it for full narrative effect that goes far beyond the underlying plot itself.

From the film below we had looked at the "By the way of Love Valley" sequence. Technically the link should take you straight to it; if not, go to the 13 min 20 sec mark. Notice how each sequence is further broken down into a number of shots, creating meaning out of the different angles used (long shot, medium long shot, medium close-up, close-up), and forging links between, say, the close-up of the cotton flower, and the picture frame of Elsie Stoneman. Not only, notice how action continues from one shot to the next (Ben Cameron exits a shot frame right, enters the next from the left and continues walking to the right), with the connection between shots maintained through eye-lines (Ben Cameron and Phil Stoneman looking at each other from one shot to the next). The way the picture of Elsie Stoneman is framed (by the frame of the screen itself, then the vignette, the outer border of the wooden frame, the inner border, and the shadow cast by the deep sides of the frame onto the picture), creates several degrees of separation between Ben Cameron and Elsie Stoneman, commenting on the foolhardiness of his infatuation.

DW GRIFFITH
The Birth of a Nation (1915):

In the following two sequences, the plot is practically the same in both cases: a man goes to a restaurant to see a woman. Notice how Griffith's techniques still underlie the film language used, and yet, each filmmaker uses different formative elements of film, or, sometimes, the same elements but in a different manner, to take the narrative into a significantly different direction in each case.

ALFRED HITCHCOCK
Vertigo (1958)

Restaurant Sequence:
http://www.dailymotion.com/video/k7skAT2TmmL1or4W0KU

ERMANNO OLMI
Il Posto (1961)
Restaurant Sequence:
http://www.dailymotion.com/video/k5XfdV07GP7XTo4W0JD