

More than any other show, watching Better Call Saul is to watch people hone their craft — to study every detail that goes into making them great at what they do. There's our main character Jimmy McGill, a sneaky good lawyer due to his con-man background of scamming people. There's Mike Ehrmantrout, who uses his experience as a police officer and attitude as a *crooked cop* to thrive in the criminal underworld. There's Kim, who becomes the best attorney in New Mexico through sheer force of will and hard work. Every inch of Better Call Saul is focused on that process of polishing. And just as impressive is the attention to detail creators Vince Gilligan and Peter Gould give that process.

The Watch ep.283 21:40 - It's like we're in this Danish design school

Better Call Saul is probably the best made show on TV right now. Does that mean I think it's the best? Not necessarily. But every single decision is made deliberately, with technical precision that would make the Germans building Gus's super meth lab blush. We're not just watching characters hone their craft, the very way we're being shown that craft is an art unto itself. So today, I want to focus on one tiny sliver of that focus: how Better Call Saul tells stories visually through 3 of its best montages. There will be some spoilers ahead although that won't be my primary focus and you know, it's a prequel series to Breaking Bad, so that's where the majority of the spoilers are anyway. I'm Jackson and this is Ideas At Play.

Let's start by trying to hammer out what I'm talking about when I say "montage editing." When I say montage what do you think of? Is it this? *Rocky training montage*

How about this? *Godfather baptism*

Or maybe this? *Requiem for a Dream drugs*

Or how about something like this? *City of God history of an apartment*

Of course, they're all *montages*, but you'd be hard pressed to find a single definition that encompasses all of them. Does there have to be music? Do the shots have to be short? Does it have to tie together separate storylines? To get to the heart of it, we actually have to go back to this crazy looking guy.

This is Sergei Eisenstein, the Soviet filmmaker who basically came up with the idea of non-linear editing as we know it today. You know, where a cut isn't just showing us what's in the next room, but cutting to another story, place, or time. He called all of that "montage editing" and while that's a little broad, his main point about editing is incredibly important here: nothing exists without context.

No matter the size, shape, or color, a montage is based on the idea of showing an audience one idea, then stacking another on top of it, and another on top of that, always building something bigger out of these smaller pieces.

Now, the reason I started thinking about any of this in the first place is because *Better Call Saul* has a *lot* of montages, and not all of them fit neatly into a conventional definition. Sure, the show has its fair share of classic ones, and we'll look at those too, but a lot of them are really just scenes without dialogue — scenes that intently follow a character's process as they set up or execute a plan. Still, no matter how we look at these sequences, it all comes back to that idea: "nothing exists without context."

Let's start by looking at this idea in one of those more conventional montages in *Better Call Saul*. Here, Jimmy is buckling down and living the public defender life. It's monotonous and a ton of work but such is life for the righteous public defender, and, as an added perk, it impresses his love interest Kim. As the montage continues, it speeds up and we can see that it is getting tougher and tougher for Jimmy to go on. Every time he has to look in the mirror and say...

"It's showtime folks"

...He grows a bit more weary. This line itself is a reference to another famous montage from the film *All That Jazz*, a movie about a theater director who quite literally works himself to death. And even as righteous as this cause appears to be on its face, we keep getting reminders that it's a dirty profession. There's no progression in the montage, we don't see Jimmy graduating to bigger and better things — being able to run further or lift heavier objects like in a training montage — it's just the repetition of the same treadmill. And it's not glamorous, it's full of grimy bathrooms, lunches in stairwells, and the sticker troll under the bridge.

Punctuation

Each shot, each cut delivers the next line in this story, but there's something special about the way *Better Call Saul* makes use of this montage. It doesn't just build on each shot and cut within itself, it's also opening a dialogue with the arc of the episode, and series as a whole. Gilligan and Gould are acutely aware of the show's status as a prequel. We know where this story is going because we've seen the next chapter in Jimmy's life.

Punctuation from Breaking Bad

And in one fell swoop, this montage shows us where Jimmy started and some of the reasons he might have turned to the dark side of the law. It is a perfect visualization of his internal struggle to do what is right and the pull to do what is exciting. But if we zoom into this episode alone, the context changes slightly. This is the second episode, and Jimmy has turned to living life on the straight and narrow because of a recent run-in with a drug kingpin:

Tuco Colombian necktie

As the montage shows us, it's not a life for him. So when he's approached by Tuco's lieutenant in the next scene, **we know what his decision will be before he does.**

"I'm a lawyer not a criminal"

This 4 minute montage is able to visually build on itself, the episode, and the series by always keeping in mind the context of where it came from, and where it's going.

And Better Call Saul creates this same kind of call and response in much more unconventional ways. Take this example from one of the best episodes of 2017: Chicanery. Jimmy and Kim are set to defend his bar license against his brother Chuck. The montage plays out, not over music but, over Kim's opening statement and follows the two as they prepare.

Clip

We follow them all the way from getting ready at home to their entrance to the courtroom and each shot tells us something about their relationship. **They're framed together in the doorway, united visually.** Kim is the one rehearsing, reading printed notes off of lined paper because she understands that appearances and implications are everything. They march into the building, his dress shoes and her stilettos clicking on the pavement like combat boots. The traffic cones are symbols of danger, caution and we know why they're there, to accommodate Chuck, reminding us of the advantages he holds over them. Still, they rise up the stairs to meet the challenge. The door divides them but they reach across it for a gaze, break it down, and enter together. This whole sequence shows us their status as a team, all the while droning on about the charges being leveled against Jimmy and the challenges they are set to face before affirming that they're doing it together.

Just 10 minutes later, Chuck is set to arrive. For the entire series, he has suffered from electromagnetic sensitivity which has left him reclusive and unable to be in a room with electricity for very long. Jimmy has cared for him and we've seen this affliction as a weakness, but now that he is the villain set to face off against Jimmy, that same affliction becomes ominous. The courtroom prepares for his arrival by removing electricity. The room darkens, time is removed. Those traffic cones from earlier come back into play, signaling the danger he brings. Even the shots of the building itself don't feel as monolithic as earlier, we can see over the top of it. We linger on the jaguar leaping from the hood of his car, a predator ready to pounce on its prey, and as Chuck climbs the stairs, we watch him from behind, the opposite angle of Jimmy and Kim.

We can see these two parties as opponents and the power disparity between them is obvious. Chuck holds all the cards. He brings with him literal darkness, like the EMP pulse before a nuclear bomb. But that's not all. The next episode starts with another similar montage after the trial is over. Jimmy and Kim have won and left Chuck in ruins. As his defense, Jimmy has humiliated Chuck by outing his affliction as a mental illness and baiting him into an outburst.

What's worse is that Jimmy orchestrated events so that Chuck's ex-wife Rebecca witnessed the whole thing.

This time the underlying audio is of Kim's closing statement, where she talks about Jimmy's value to the community. Meanwhile it's cross-cut with Rebecca leaving the courtroom and chasing after Chuck, showing us the worst of Jimmy as we hear about his best. Each time we cross the threshold in these two episodes, we see the effect this trial has on our characters, and hear it tied back to the pageantry of the trial itself. This is the kind of intricate storytelling that makes Jimmy's transformation into Saul Goodman the scam-happy lawyer so compelling, because the show is able to tell two parallel stories painted onto the same setting.

Speaking of parallel stories, we haven't touched at all on the other half of Better Call Saul: our main guy Mike Ehrmantrout (punctuation with people trying to pronounce his name). If you've seen Breaking Bad, you're familiar with Mike as a part-fixer, part-detective, part-spy, part-black ops professional. It's hard to sum Mike up into one word but if I had to pick one it would be just that; professional. Every action he takes is calculated, precise, and takes into account every possible variable.

His scenes stand out in stark contrast to Jimmy's for a couple reasons, but one of the most glaring differences is that there is little to no dialogue in a majority of Mike's scenes. His story is told almost entirely visually and uses editing as its narrator.

Better Call Saul never wastes time explaining what will happen or what is planned when it can answer those questions on the fly through a careful study of how a character goes about their business. We have no idea what Jimmy is up to when he shows up at a 24-hour print and copy center at the end of season 2, but as we watch him work, we figure it out as his plan develops, in the same way that an image slowly becomes visible on photograph paper once you submerge it in the right chemicals.

Take this scene from the third season. While it's, nearly 6 minutes and there are only 2 lines of dialogue — which are read as subtitles — I don't think most people would think of it as a montage. The music is purely atmospheric, the cuts aren't fast. It doesn't compress time or space into neatly edited packages. But it behaves the same way as those other two montages we looked at, using its editing to tell the story of Mike's process.

The first thing the show does is establish the scene. It's big, wide, open, and empty. Then we see these sneakers. Coming into this scene, we don't know what Mike is doing there, all we know is that he put these sneakers on this telephone wire and that he put drugs in them. So where is he? Nearby, but far enough away that he needs binoculars. Already, the edit has established a place, showed us where our character is in relation to the place, and shown us a piece of the puzzle for what he plans to do there.

As we go on, each cut either brings up or answers a question, moving the story forward.

Who is he waiting for? Cut to a truck, then to its drivers. They exit the truck, why? Mike follows them in his scope as they ditch their guns. Is he going to shoot them? No. He points his rifle upward and fires off a round, then a few more. Which brings its own question of why? Through subtitles, we literally see them come to the decision that the shots are coming from hunters. This was Mike's plan: to trick them. But why?

We see his true target, the sneakers. As the truck drives underneath, he shoots the sneakers, spilling drugs all over the truck. Then we see why they ditched their guns: they're just over the border in Mexico. Cut to the fallout of his actions as border patrol seizes them and their cargo.

We learn almost nothing from "the script" here. Instead, it's the edit that asks and then answers each question that moves the story forward, and always without dialogue. Ironically, it reads like a sentence. Each cut or word on its own wouldn't mean anything. But, once they're played out together — in context — they create a coherent thought. Each edit doesn't just move us from one action to the next, but pushes the story along.

It might not be as obvious as Jimmy's life as a public defender, but it's built on top of the same idea: nothing exists without context.

And that idea is essential to understanding Better Call Saul. It's a show that has frequently been identified as living a double life, being two shows at the same time: The Mike show and The Jimmy show, which seldom meet. But one thing that ties everything together is obsession, addiction our work, which is why it makes so much sense to deliver information through these tightly focused sequences. Better Call Saul itself is about creating context. We know these people as side characters from Breaking Bad, and now we're learning their story. The reasons why they are who they are and how they became that way. Because after all, nothing exists without context.

And if you're looking to spend some time refining your own craft, head on over to Skillshare. Whether it's learning how to shoot your own montages on a budget, crafting a consistent brand on social media, or making some kickass gelato, Skillshare has you covered. They're always adding new content that's way higher quality and more in depth than anything you're going to find here on YouTube. And if you follow my link in the description, you can unlimited access to all of it for 2 months FREE, and it helps out the channel.

And speaking of the channel, thanks for watching! Please like, share, and subscribe. There's tons more to talk about with Better Call Saul so if you're interested in that let me know in the comments. And if you want to help the channel out and get access to all sorts of extra material like my 16 pages of notes for this video and my map of every montage in Better Call Saul, head over to Patreon and throw in a buck or two to get access. This video took me a bit longer to

make because I was moving and swamped with some other work, but I might have a big announcement coming for you guys soon. Stay tuned and thanks again!