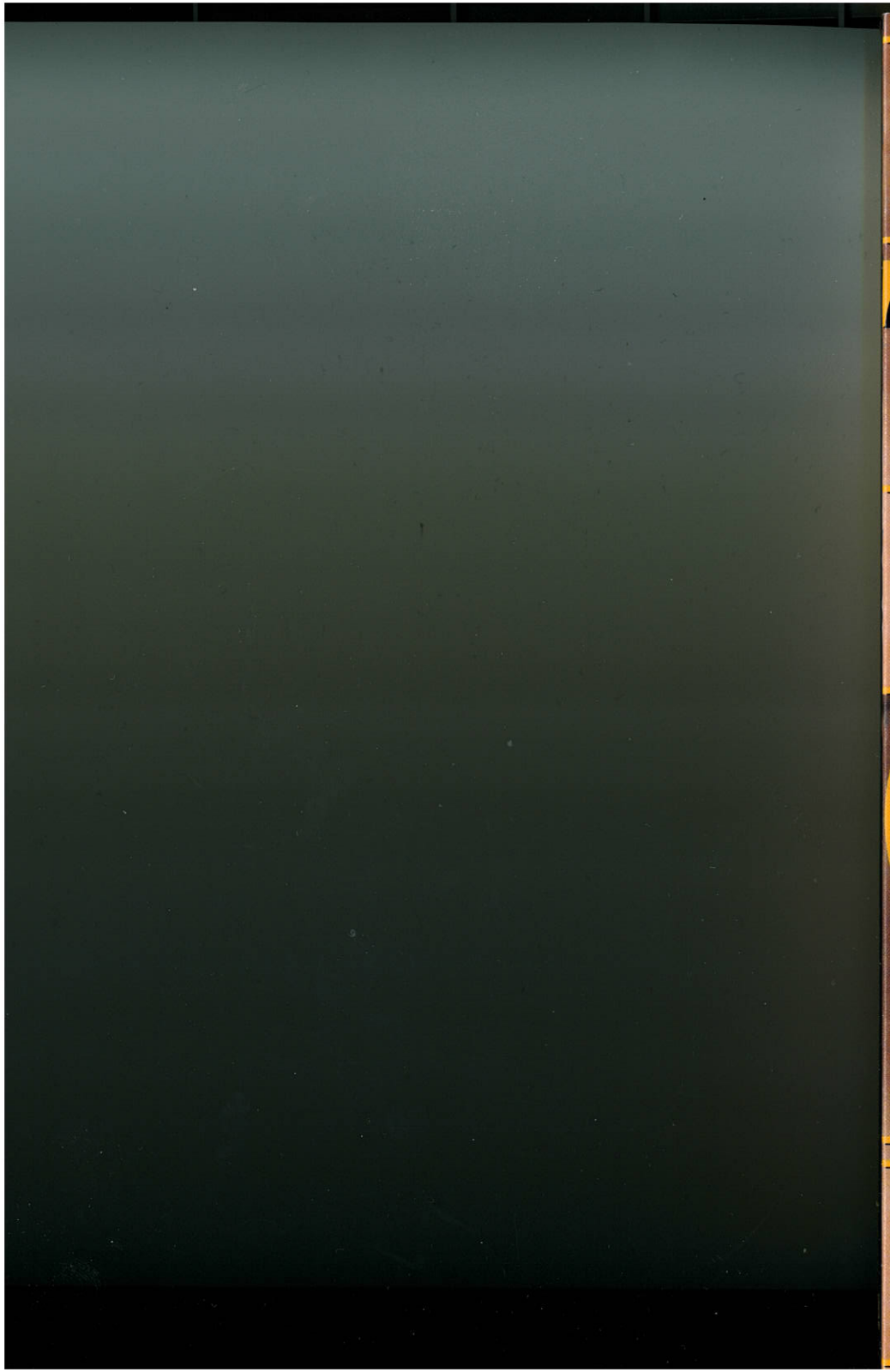


Nothing is as fascinating as spending hours listening to Walter's theories of life and cinema and his countless tidbits of wisdom, which he leaves behind him like Hansel and Gretel's trail of bread: guidance and nourishment. –FRANCIS COPPOLA

# IN THE BLINK OF AN EYE

## A PERSPECTIVE ON FILM EDITING

2ND EDITION

WALTER MURCH

because it had more cuts in it. Frequently, it takes more work and discernment to decide where *not* to cut—don't feel you have to cut just because you are being paid to. You are being paid to make decisions, and as far as whether to cut or not, the editor is actually making twenty-four decisions a second: "No. No. No. No. No. No. No. No. No. No. Yes!"

An overactive editor, who changes shots too frequently, is like a tour guide who can't stop pointing things out: "And up there we have the Sistine Ceiling, and over here we have the Mona Lisa, and, by the way, look at these floor tiles . . ." If you are on a tour, you do want the guide to point things out for you, of course, but some of the time you just want to walk around and see what *you* see. If the guide—that is to say, the editor—doesn't have the confidence to let people themselves occasionally choose what they want to look at, or to leave things to their imagination, then he is pursuing a goal (complete control) that in the end is self-defeating. People will eventually feel constrained and then resentful from the constant pressure of his hand on the backs of their necks.

Well, if what I'm saying is to do more with less, then is there any way to say how much less? Is it possible to take this right to its absurd logical conclusion and say, "Don't cut at all?" Now we've come back to our first problem: Film is cut for practical reasons *and* film is cut because cutting—that sudden disruption of reality—can be an effective tool in itself. So, if the goal is as few cuts as possible, when you *have* to make a cut, what is it that makes it a good one?

# The Rule of Six

The first thing discussed in film-school editing classes is what I'm going to call three-dimensional continuity: In shot A, a man opens a door, walks halfway across the room, and then the film cuts to the next shot, B, picking him up at that same halfway point and continuing with him the rest of the way across the room, where he sits down at his desk, or something.

For many years, particularly in the early years of sound film, that was the rule. You struggled to preserve continuity of three-dimensional space, and it was seen as a failure of rigor or skill to violate it.[9] Jumping people around in space was just not done, except, perhaps, in extreme circumstances—fights or earthquakes—where there was a lot of violent action going on.

I actually place this three-dimensional continuity at the bottom of a list of six *criteria* for what makes a

[9] The problem with this thinking can be seen in any multi-camera situation-comedy on television. Because the cameras are filming simultaneously, the actors are necessarily always "correct" as far as their spatial continuity and relation to each other is concerned, but that absolutely does not prevent bad cuts from being made all the time.

good cut. At the top of the list is Emotion, the thing you come to last, if at all, at film school largely because it's the hardest thing to define and deal with. *How do you want the audience to feel?* If they are feeling what you want them to feel all the way through the film, you've done about as much as you can ever do. What they finally remember is not the editing, not the camerawork, not the performances, not even the story—it's how they felt.

An ideal cut (for me) is the one that satisfies all the following six criteria at once: 1) it is true to the emotion of the moment; 2) it advances the story; 3) it occurs at a moment that is rhythmically interesting and "right"; 4) it acknowledges what you might call "eye-trace"—the concern with the location and movement of the audience's focus of interest within the frame; 5) it respects "planarity"—the grammar of three dimensions transposed by photography to two (the questions of stage-line, etc.); 6) and it respects the three-dimensional continuity of the actual space (where people are in the room and in relation to one another).

| | |
|---|---|
| 1) Emotion | 51% |
| 2) Story | 23% |
| 3) Rhythm | 10% |
| 4) Eye-trace | 7% |
| 5) Two-dimensional plane of screen | 5% |
| 6) Three-dimensional space of action | 4% |

Emotion, at the top of the list, is the thing that you should try to preserve at all costs. If you find you have to sacrifice certain of those six things to make a cut, sacrifice your way up, item by item, from the bottom.



For instance, if you are considering a range of possible edits for a particular moment in the film, and you find that there is one cut that gives the right emotion *and* moves the story forward, *and* is rhythmically satisfying, *and* respects eye-trace and planarity, *but* it fails to preserve the continuity of three-dimensional space, then, by all means, that is the cut you should make. If none of the other edits has the right emotion, then sacrificing spatial continuity is well worth it.

The values I put after each item are slightly tongue-in-cheek, but not completely: Notice that the top two on the list (emotion and story) are worth far more than the bottom four (rhythm, eye-trace, planarity, spatial continuity), and when you come right down to it, under most circumstances, the top of the list—emotion—is worth more than all five of the things underneath it.

And, in fact, there is a practical side to this, which is that if the emotion is right and the story is advanced in a unique, interesting way, in the right rhythm, the audience will tend to be unaware of (or unconcerned about) editorial problems with lower-order items like eye-trace, stage-line, spatial continuity, etc. The general principle seems to be that satisfying the criteria of items higher on the list tends to obscure problems with items lower on the list, but not vice-versa: For instance, getting Number 4 (eye-trace) working properly will minimize a problem with Number 5 (stage-line), whereas if Number 5 (stage-line) is correct but

Number 4 (eye-trace) is not taken into consideration, the cut will be unsuccessful.

Now, in practice, you will find that those top three things on the list—emotion, story, rhythm—are extremely tightly connected. The forces that bind them together are like the bonds between the protons and neutrons in the nucleus of the atom. Those are, by far, the tightest bonds, and the forces connecting the lower three grow progressively weaker as you go down the list.

Most of the time you will be able to satisfy all six criteria: the three-dimensional space and the two-dimensional plane of the screen and the eye-trace, and the rhythm and story and emotion will all fall into place. And, of course, you should always aim for this, if possible—never accept less when more is available to you.

What I'm suggesting is a list of priorities. If you have to give up something, don't ever give up emotion before story. Don't give up story before rhythm, don't give up rhythm before eye-trace, don't give up eye-trace before planarity, and don't give up planarity before spatial continuity.

# Misdirection

Underlying these considerations is the central preoccupation of a film editor, which should be to put himself/herself in place of the audience. What is the audience going to be thinking at any particular moment? Where are they going to be looking? What do you want them to think about? What do they need to think about? And, of course, what do you want them to feel? If you keep this in mind (and it's the preoccupation of every magician), then you are a kind of magician. Not in the supernatural sense, just an everyday, working magician.

Houdini's job was to create a sense of wonder, and to do that he didn't want you to look *here* (to the right) because that's where he was undoing his chains, so he found a way to make you look *there* (to the left). He was "misdirecting" you, as magicians say. He was doing something that would cause ninety-nine percent of you to look over here when he wanted you to. And an editor can do that and does do that—and *should* do that.

Sometimes, though, you can get caught up in the details and lose track of the overview. When that hap-

# Dreaming in Pairs

In many ways, the film editor performs the same role for the director as the text editor does for the writer of a book—to encourage certain courses of action, to counsel against others, to discuss whether to include specific material in the finished work or whether new material needs to be added. At the end of the day, though, it is the writer who then goes off and puts the words together.

But in film, the editor also has the responsibility for actually assembling the images (that is to say, the "words") in a certain order and in a certain rhythm. And here it becomes the *director's* role to offer advice and counsel much as he would to an actor interpreting a part. So it seems that the film editor/director relationship oscillates back and forth during the course of the project, the numerator becoming the denominator and vice versa.

In dream therapy there is a technique that pairs the patient—the *dreamer*, in this case—with someone who is there to *listen* to the dream. As soon as possible after waking, the dreamer gets together with his listener to review the dreams of the previous night.





Frequently there is nothing, or just a single disappointing image, but this is usually enough to begin the process. Once the image is described, the listener's job is to propose an imaginary sequence of events based on that fragment. An airplane, for instance, is all that is remembered. The listener immediately proposes that it must have been an airliner flying over Tahiti filled with golf balls for a tournament in Indonesia. No sooner has this description been offered than the dreamer finds himself protesting: "No, it was a biplane, flying over the battlefields of France, and Hannibal was shooting arrows at it from his legion of elephants." In other words, the dream itself, hidden in the memory, rises to its own defense when it hears itself being challenged by an alternate version, and so reveals itself. This revelation about bi-planes and elephants can in turn prompt the listener to elaborate another improvisation, which will coax out another aspect of the hidden dream, and so on, until as much of the dream is revealed as possible.

The relationship between director and editor is somewhat similar in that the director is generally the dreamer and the editor is the listener. But even for the most well-prepared of directors, there are limits to the imagination and memory, particularly at the level of fine detail, and so it is the editor's job to propose alternate scenarios as bait to encourage the sleeping dream to rise to its defense and thus reveal itself more fully. And these scenarios unfold themselves at the largest level (should such-and-such a scene be removed from the film for the good of the whole?) and at the most detailed (should this shot end on this frame

or 1/24th of a second later on the *next* frame?). But sometimes it is the editor who is the dreamer and the director who is the listener, and it is he who now offers the bait to tempt the collective dream to reveal more of itself.

As any fisherman can tell you, it is the quality of the bait that determines the kind of fish you catch.

# Team Work: Multiple Editors

Not only does the editor collaborate with the director, there are frequent times when two or more editors are working simultaneously, sometimes with equal authority. This seems odd to many people, who do not see the same thing happening with directors of photography or production designers. But for some reason, which has to do with the collaborative mentality of editors and with the fact that the time pressure of post-production is not quite so unforgiving in its consequences as it is during production, multiple editors are often employed. I have worked, and enjoyed, collaborating with other editors on many films: *The Conversation, Apocalypse Now, The Unbearable Lightness of Being,* and *Godfather, Part III.*

The main advantage to collaborative editing is speed; the main risk is lack of coherence. But if there are upward of 350,000 feet of workprint (sixty-five hours), you are probably going to need to take that risk and have two editors, or at least an associate editor working under supervision. But problems can

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sometimes arise if there is just one editor on a film and he develops a locked viewpoint about the material. This is particularly troublesome if the director and the editor have not worked together before and have no time to develop a common language. In this case, it might not be a bad idea to consider having multiple editors.

*The Godfather* was the first film on which Francis worked with two editors. Originally there had been just a single editor, but the problem of locked viewpoint became acute and he was let go after several months. The decision was made to reconstitute what had been done up to that point and start again, but because they had effectively lost those months, and it looked as though the film was going to be almost three hours long with an inflexible deadline, it made sense to hire two editors. The film was still shooting and there was just a lot of work to do: Each editor had a ninety-minute film to complete in twenty-four weeks. But unlike the later *Godfather, Part II* or *Apocalypse*, the work was split strictly in half. Bill Reynolds cut the first part and Peter Zinner cut the last part. There's a specific point where Bill's section ends and Peter's begins.

On *Godfather, Part II*, although the responsibility for editing was divided up in a checkerboard pattern, scenes were initially cut and recut by the same person.[10] But when Francis began to play with the structure of the film, people found themselves recutting what others had originally edited.

[10] The editors of *Godfather, Part II*, were Peter Zinner, Barry Malkin, and Richard Marks.



The interest on a $25 million film is around $250,000 a month. If having two editors can help you release that film a month earlier, they will have repaid a good portion, if not all, of their salaries for the whole film. It is simply a matter of how much you want to achieve in the time you have available. If you end up with a cut-per-day rate of 1.47, as we did on *Apocalypse*, that means that many different avenues have been explored to get to the final product. If that's what you want to do, you probably need more than one editor.