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Making A Story Move: The Art of Film Editing

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Making a Story Move: The Art of Film Editing

By Daniel Gross

University of Connecticut Honors Thesis

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Abstract

An in-depth treatise on the process of film editing, featuring 16 original interviews from renowned editors. These editors share insight and anecdotes about the daily joys and difficulties of their careers (and the professional principles they subscribe to), as well as the creative, interpersonal, and technical challenges they constantly face. Discussion of the “MTV influence” behind modern film editing is offered, and this influence is explored in filmmaking history. Advice and inspiration is also shared for the benefit of future film editors; Hollywood editors tell their own stories about how they thrived in a notoriously-difficult field, and what it would take for an aspiring editor to do the same.

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Carol Littleton – the worldly veteran who inspires and beckons me

My mom and dad – the people who endowed me with more than I can know

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Introduction

In the year of 1973, unbeknownst to most of the world, cinematic history of an infamous sort was being created; post-production was underway on a legendary horror film. That horror film was none other than *The Exorcist*. Director William Friedkin was in a screening room one day, watching unedited footage shot in Iraq, intended for use in the film's opening sequence...and he was not happy with it. Friedkin did not see a filmic story in any of this raw footage, and had little idea of how to find it, which led him to label the footage as "fucking garbage" (B. Smith, personal communication, January 13, 2008). It was at that point he came up with a bold idea...even though there were already four different picture editors working on the film, he decided to recruit an anonymous editor named Bud S. Smith for the sole purpose of editing down this problematic footage. Bud had once edited a documentary for Friedkin, and had previously worked in multiple different forms of media editing, but there was still a great deal at stake when such a relatively unknown editor was hired to edit just one sequence.

Fortunately, Friedkin's decision ended up paying off. After Bud independently assembled the Iraq footage and showed it to him, Friedkin enthusiastically changed his judgment to "fucking genius" (B. Smith, personal communication, January 13, 2008). Bud Smith became a go-to editor in Hollywood after *The Exorcist* was released, and Friedkin hired him for editing and co-producing work on his next five feature films. How was all this made possible? The reason is simple...it's the power of good storytelling, and good storytelling ability, conveyed through the art of motion picture film editing. Thousands of people in the Hollywood area constantly devote their lives to anonymous, often arduous labor to help make filmmaking possible. Film editors are no exception to

this fact...but what if the labor in film editing is storytelling in one of its purest forms? “I love storytelling, and I get to do it all day long, every day...when you get it right, there’s no better feeling”, states Paul Rubell, a renowned Hollywood editor who has worked on such films as *The Insider* and *Collateral* (personal communication, February 2, 2008).

Roger Barton (editor on such films as *Pearl Harbor* and *Star Wars: Episode III*) describes the duty of film editing in a straightforward manner: “It’s a great responsibility to be handed millions of feet of film, and asked to make a compelling story out of it” (personal communication, May 10, 2008). *Terminator 2* and *Armageddon* editor Mark Goldblatt, on the other hand, sums up the pleasure of film editing in the most allegorical fashion when he states: “We get to play in a cinematic sandbox all day, and we actually get paid for doing so. We’re sort of filmic masters of time and space...it’s very satisfying work” (personal communication, February 3, 2008). But Virginia Katz (editor on such films as *Gods and Monsters* and *Dreamgirls*), prefers to look at the joy of film editing in the labyrinthine context of film production itself: “The work that everyone puts into the making of a movie, from pre-production to post, is thrilling...it is so rewarding to see the final product come to life” (personal communication, February 6, 2008).

While these profound rewards are certainly ostensible, the collaborative and technological foundations of the post-production process are forcing film editors (and their collaborators) to deal with a whole new variety of challenges in their line of work; most veteran editors have great insight into what these challenges are. If a film historian were to be queried about the post-production process, however, the historical privileges behind this process would most likely be emphasized...for a long time in our cinematic history, the art of film editing was an undeveloped one.

The Pioneers of Modern Film Editing

In the year of 1878, a photographer named Eadweard Muybridge was hired to carry out an unusual photographic study. This study was hoping to prove that horses lift all four of their legs simultaneously as they run. According to author Eric Barnouw, “[Muybridge] placed a series of cameras - at first twelve, later several times that many - side by side along a track...a horse galloping through them clicked the cameras in swift succession” (p. 3). It was this early study of motion that inadvertently launched the history of cinema, and changed the world as a result. Two decades later, well-renowned engineering wizards such as Thomas Edison, the Lumiere brothers, and Edwin S. Porter pushed this blooming photographic technology further by making hundreds of silent short films throughout the late 19th and early 20th century, both of thematic and non-fictional variety.

Nearly all films made in the infancy of cinema history “[were] dominated by the so-called tableau style, which showed the entire scene in a single shot” (Bordwell, p. 87). It was an American film director named D.W. Griffith who helped pave the way for all kinds of essential storytelling tools, such as “the possibility of breaking a scene into closer views of the characters, or joining disparate spaces through alternating editing”, which is now largely identified as “continuity editing” (Bordwell, p. 13). Famed French director Jean-Luc Godard, himself a pioneer of editing with his usage of jump-cuts (as well as his unorthodox usage of close-ups and long shots), has an interesting theory as to why Griffith felt the need to reinvent the cinematic wheel. According to Godard, “When we study the history of Griffith, we see that he was searching for something when he invented the close-up...15 years after Lumiere, he needed a way to cut through

reality...he was, in fact, a reactionary” (Choe, p. 115). However, it is hard to deny that Griffith’s body of work, while certainly “reacting” against established cinematic language and audience expectations, is deeply and unapologetically rooted in filmed reality; a Russian filmmaker named Sergei Eisenstein is one of the first filmmakers to not just “cut through reality”, but to literally shred it into tiny pieces.

In the 1920s, “the Soviet montage school...explored the rhythmic possibilities of strings of short shots”, and Eisenstein was foremost among these gallant Soviets (Bordwell & Thompson, 1996, p. 280). As he further integrated these “shot strings” into his directorial vocabulary, he helped pioneer a new type of editing known as “montage editing”. Renowned film scholar David Bordwell claims that Eisenstein “deliberately opposed himself to [D.W. Griffith’s] continuity editing, seeking out and exploiting what Hollywood would call discontinuities...Eisenstein's films roam freely through time and space to construct an intricate pattern of images calculated to stimulate the viewer's senses, emotions, and thinking” (p. 306). In achieving this, Eisenstein all-out rejected Griffith’s invisible editing doctrines, stating that “two film pieces of any kind, placed together, inevitably combine into a new concept, a new quality, arising out of that juxtaposition” (Begin, p. 1120). He thus frequently delivered his filmic ideas through quick-cut clashing images, and the original intent behind those ideas “[was] not simply handed to the viewer; rather, the editing discontinuities [forced] the viewer to work out implicit meanings” (p. 309).

This result is exactly what Eisenstein wanted, as many of his films were designed to convey Marxist propaganda to the largely illiterate Russian commoners. In this sense, one could argue that there is some innate similarity between Griffith and Eisenstein’s

cinematic agendas: Griffith used parallel editing and flashbacks to encourage his audience to follow a story thematically, and Eisenstein used montage editing to insist his audience follow a sequence of ideas visually. Eisenstein once stated, “In rhythmic montage, it is movement within the frame that impels the montage movement from frame to frame”, and this could easily lead to the conclusion that every frame of film or video, no matter where or when that frame came from, could potentially become an idea waiting to be fully expressed to an audience (Baron, p. 32).

The film editing profession was invented to facilitate the expression of these ideas as they advanced throughout the 20th century...which is why editing is known as “the result of human praxis, not natural process” (Bordwell, p. 104). Joe Hutshing (editor on such films as *JFK*, *Jerry Maguire*, and *Almost Famous*), carries this belief about modern filmmaking: “No matter how low budget a film is, it’s the same whether you’re editing a home movie or a 200 million dollar studio film...it’s just one shot in front of another. You make some edits, watch what you’ve done, see what’s wrong or needs adjusting, and then correct it...that’s what editors do all day long” (personal communication, February 6, 2008) In this sense, it is practically indisputable that “graphic and rhythmic relationships are present in the editing of any film” (Bordwell & Thompson, 1996, p. 273). Perhaps Jean-Luc Godard would be uniformly correct in this oft-quoted assertion: “One image does not necessarily show. A true image is a group of images” (Choe, p. 118).

It is all too easy for a scholar of film to underestimate just how psychologically affecting a “group of images” can be. One of the earliest examples of this was Louis Lumiere’s 1896 short film *Arrival of a Train*: “In this we see a train approach, from long-

shot to close-up. The camera is placed on the platform near the edge of the track. The arrival of the train - virtually 'on camera' - made spectators scream and dodge... [this] offered audiences an experience quite foreign to the theater” (Barnouw, p. 8). Today, audience reactions such as this are largely unheard of, but public backlash towards filmic images continues to be commonplace. “Eisenstein-esque” editing has come to be a common staple in today’s filmmaking, which many filmgoers and critics have come to actively despise. Even while there are plenty of cinematic exceptions and theoretical contradictions towards the stigma of fast editing, editors continue to carry great responsibility for this backlash.

Modern Film Editing: Controversial Influence

Few outsiders to the film industry can appreciate how difficult it can be to properly express ideas through professional film editing; there is a multitude of personal, interpersonal, and artistic challenges to be considered. But even when a film editor's work is done, and the film in question is complete, there are still challenges left to be faced. There could easily be lingering doubt concerning the influences that lay behind the film's editing, as well as how a paying audience or film critic might potentially respond. David Bordwell sums up this editorial controversy in an interesting way: "Today, films are on average cut more rapidly than at any other time in U.S. studio filmmaking. Some films flirt with shot lengths reminiscent of late 1920s Soviet silent montage. Between 1961 and 1999, I can find only one film with an ASL of less than 2 seconds, but in the 2000s there's at least one every year (e.g., *Moulin Rouge*)" (p. 122).

When *Moulin Rouge* was released, it opened to widespread critical acclaim and a \$57 million box office gross, and ended up with eight Academy Award nominations. But not everyone was happy with the film, and some singled out the editing as the reason why; according to the film's editor, Jill Bilcock, one reviewer stated that the film "looks like it was edited by a Russian serial killer on crack". Bilcock defends the editing by affirming this: "We work on a principle of montage, like Eisenstein's theory of [juxtaposition] - say, you show a dog, then you show its mouth and that equals 'bark.' With *Moulin Rouge*, we were using that technique to bring out feelings in the audience...and in this case, it may take 50 shots to make the dog bark" (Silberg). Perhaps Bilcock would agree with Kent Beyda (editor on such films as *This Is Spinal Tap* and *Gremlins 2: The New Batch*), when he states: "Each film presents its own challenges. The

important thing is to keep it interesting and entertaining” (personal communication, January 28, 2008).

Bilcock and Beyda have shed insight into a popular theory of filmmaking known as the Narrative Editing Principle, which states that “the consistency of [a] story line will overrule the perceptually disturbing effects in the transition between successive shots, as attention will primarily be directed to grasping the succession of significant events in the story” (Germeys, 459). In other words, if the script’s underlying meaning(s), the director’s intent, the actors’ interpretations, and the resulting footage call for particular techniques of editing to most potently and effectively tell that story, the audience will accept those techniques. This is certainly a principle that David Bordwell might agree with, as evidenced by this quote: “Once the viewer has mastered narrative structure to a useful degree, she or he has a sufficiently strong sense of context in which to ‘place’ particular cinematic devices” (p. 95). Joe Hutshing also sheds insight into this reasoning when he asserts, “The techniques of editing are different for each genre, but it’s always about using the best moments you have for any given scene” (personal communication, February 6, 2008).

Hutshing certainly isn’t alone in this belief...every one of the editors spoken to for this paper seems to view editing this way, and some don’t even think of editing in terms of “techniques” at all. For example, Tim Streeto (editor on the celebrated independent film *The Squid and the Whale*), states: “The nuts and bolts of a film, character and story, should always be what motivates an editing style, I think”. This may seem like a contradictory sentiment considering that Streeto edited *The Squid and the Whale* in a deliberately jagged and disorienting fashion to support the film’s New Wave-

influenced verite aesthetic. Like Jill Bilcock, Streeto is well aware of the controversy that lurks beneath editing such as this; in fact, he goes as far to label this aesthetic “stressful”. “It draws attention to the editing, to the filmmaker, and if it's not well thought out, will seem indulgent and pretentious...my biggest concern [was] to not get in the way of good performances”, Streeto claims (personal communication, February 10, 2008).

Fortunately, the editing did not detract from the film's critical and commercial acclaim. Streeto was greatly satisfied with the film as well, believing that “the editing complemented the tone of the film, the way it was shot, and the actors' performances perfectly”. (personal communication, February 10, 2008). Hollywood action editor Roger Barton would accept no less of an outcome concerning his editing work: “It's a fair question to think an editor has a style that he or she takes with him on each job, but the reality is the footage speaks for itself. What makes a good editor is knowing the fundamentals of storytelling first, and after that allowing the actors do the heavy lifting” (personal communication, May 10, 2008).

Renowned British editor Tony Lawson (editor on such films as *Straw Dogs*, *Barry Lyndon*, and *Wuthering Heights*) has an identical conviction about the responsibility of editors as devout storytellers. “The story is what dictates any technique or style in my editing”, Lawson claims. “Anything else would have no meaning, would be an empty device, and disallow any emotional involvement for the audience...hence the criticism leveled at some films for being like ‘an MTV movie’” (personal communication, February 5, 2008). David Bordwell echoes this sentiment when he discusses the principle of “jump-cutting”: “If there is one type of cut that the Hollywood

editor deploras, it is the jump cut, in which a segment of time is eliminated without the camera being moved to a new vantage point” (p. 403).

“I like jump cuts. I don’t know why”, confesses *Matchstick Men* and *Kingdom of Heaven* editor Dody Dorn. However, Dorn goes on to say: “I only like them, though, if the jarring impact of the jump cut is called for narratively”...Jean-Luc Godard’s classic 1960 film *A bout de souffle* is the most commonly cited cinematic example of this unusual narrative necessity (personal communication, February 10, 2008). Given Dorn’s Oscar-nominated work on the flashback-driven detective film *Memento*, it’s not surprising that she is known around Hollywood as a master of the unusual narrative. The post-production process of *Memento* was a noteworthy challenge that few editors can fully understand...David Bordwell has this to say about the film’s aesthetic hurdles: “Writer-director Christopher Nolan must keep us focused on [the main character’s] amnesia, on which the film's premise turns. In addition, the plot must clarify which stream of action is moving backward, and which forward, and the film must help the viewer link the retrograde scenes in some coherent fashion...Nolan makes his rewind plot provoke curiosity and suspense” (pp. 78-79). Because Dorn’s support of Nolan’s efforts was so innovative and devoted, she was given the task of editing *Moulin Rouge* director Baz Luhrmann’s ambitious WWII epic, *Australia*, on a round-the-clock basis; Dorn now refers to this daunting experience as a "wild ride" (personal communication, November 30, 2008).

Joe Hutshing could very easily sympathize with this professional plight, given his observation that “100 hour work weeks are not uncommon, sometimes for months at a stretch, and all the while...under extreme pressure” (personal communication, February

6, 2008). The fact that filmmaking usually requires this sort of extensive commitment is a grim truth that most casual moviegoers are unaware of; it is especially difficult when most of these work weeks are spent pushing the boundaries of cinematic storytelling, with no guarantee that audiences will receive these techniques favorably. For film editors, however, there are all sorts of other creative difficulties to worry about, which are frequently resolved one cut at a time. Each of these cuts helps the editor explore and control the “flow” of filmed material, and to achieve latent satisfaction in this process, which is much easier said than done.

The Creative Process of Editing

When speaking to Glen Scantlebury (editor on such films as *Dracula*, *Con Air*, and *Transformers*), one might be surprised by his frank assertions about what makes an editor great...or expendable. Among the assertions he conveys is this: "I get inspired by working on a film. When you don't get inspired anymore, you're done, you have peaked" (personal communication, January 24, 2008). This is an assertion that any film editor could have a very hard time disputing. One of the key components of a film editor's work is not unlike that of the painter, musician, or writer; film editing is a job with many facets of artistic interpretation, and it typically comes with satisfaction after each artwork is completed. This satisfaction derives from the editor's instantaneous control over filmed material: "When the filmmaker adjusts the length of shots in relation to each other, she or he is controlling the *rhythmic potential* of editing." (Bordwell & Thompson, 1996, p. 278)

Some editors believe this satisfaction is worth the unique professional challenges that face them, and Joe Hutshing would likely consider himself one of them. Hutshing obtained a degree in Fine and Applied Arts from the University of Oregon before moving out to Hollywood, unsure of where he would apply his artistic skills; when he learned about the film editing process, he plunged into unpaid student film editing jobs and low-paying professional editing jobs, equipped only with instruction manuals for the machines he was using. Therefore, when Hutshing claims that most of his editing choices "are based on intuition or gut instinct... others are based on pure logic", one could easily interpret that as an indicator of the unique ambitions that built his career (personal communication, February 6, 2008).

Ambition, however, is usually rendered meaningless for a film editor when his or her work on a film is heading towards completion, and other people's ambitions begin to enter into the equation. Film editors are generating a product that nearly every single person involved with the film wants to see, if not influence themselves in some fashion, and a large part of this desire lies in the potential amount of people around the world who are hopefully just as eager to see the film. But there's only so much a film editor can contribute to appease all those people, and it's up to that editor to maximize that contribution using as much artistic and technical ability as possible.

Editor Mark Goldblatt would certainly respect this sentiment. According to his interpretation of film editing, "We take all the elements...and, noting the director's intentions, we work the material to produce the best possible motion picture that we can, given our resources." But how does a film editor go about doing this abstract, yet demanding task? The answer to this question lies in the many "tricks of the trade" that editors use to absorb their audience in a subjectively compelling story on a daily basis, the most important of which, according to many editors, is visual and aural rhythm, which is dictated by the film's preexisting "narrative, performances, sound, and camerawork", according to Goldblatt (personal communication, February 3, 2008). Glen Scantlebury goes as far as to make another frank assertion in this regard: "If you don't have rhythm, you probably won't make a good editor" (personal communication, January 24, 2008).

Bud Smith takes his stab at summing up the duties of film editing when he says: "It's all about rhythm... [and] trying to get the best 'take' out of each film, and making each film character driven" (personal communication, January 13, 2008). One may view

this philosophy as a more refined evolution of Eisenstein-era montage editing...the process becomes defined as an expressionistic storytelling medium, but not just in terms of infamous ideological films. According to author Karen Pearlman, “putting two shots together, each of which has inherent rhythm, makes a third rhythm, which is not the same, or even just the sum of the first two.” (p. 114) Pearlman goes as far as to equate editors to actors when she says, “Intuition about rhythm is actually learned knowledge with two origins: one is the rhythm of the world that is experienced by an editor, and the other is the rhythm of the body that experiences it...[the editor] has to bring learned editing craft skills.” (p. 113)

Carol Littleton (editor on such films as *E.T.*, *The Big Chill*, and *The Manchurian Candidate*) prefers to describe these skills as “highly honed analytical skills”. She believes that “the skills you need for music is my approach for film editing... [you] practice, practice, practice, then try to forget technique and find emotion” (personal communication, January 15, 2008). This search for rhythm and emotion “translates” the film’s basic elements into an expertly-flowing story for the film’s cast, crew, and audiences to enjoy (which is what many editors believe their skills are primarily used for). Editors spend large parts of their days analyzing raw footage to accomplish that goal, and many fellow collaborators behind the film are deeply invested in this task as well...which lends a whole other dimension to the editor’s already-challenging work.

The Interpersonal Challenges of Editing

It seems straightforward for Robert Hoffman (editor on such films as *Bad Santa* and *Art School Confidential*) to value the editing choices he is individually responsible for. “In any film, I look for the most truthful and honest performances, and the most believable thing”, Hoffman claims (personal communication, February 1, 2008). Roger Barton has just as great an appreciation for his own personal contributions, as evidenced by when he says: “The choices we make, both in terms of performance, pace, and style really begin to give the film an identity, and having that control over how the audience relates to the story is really quite satisfying” (personal communication, May 10, 2008). However, it is difficult to ignore that these choices contribute to a film that is primarily authored by the director, where it is commonly believed any editor’s loyalties should lie.

Anita Brandt-Burgoyne (editor on such films as *A Very Brady Sequel*, *Good Burger*, and *Legally Blonde*) sheds light into this belief when she says: “Collaboration is tricky, but I really believe a film usually turns out better when no one person overrides another.” But like most editors, she is acutely aware that this optimum sense of collaboration is often eroded in mainstream Hollywood, where droves of people invest in, oversee, scrutinize, and propagate creative activity (the director being only one of them), and somebody’s head is always on a hypothetical chopping block. Burgoyne’s solution to this predicament can be summed up in one word...patience. “One of the best things an editor can possess is patience... [you] have to be part psychologist and part diplomat—there are many personalities in the filmmaking process and fragile egos and lots of money at stake...you have to do the job in spite of the occasional tense situation or

pressures...your only agenda is to help everyone make the best film possible”, claims Burgoyne (personal communication, January 10, 2008).

These ideas may be a mouthful to remember, but they play a key role in the increasing challenges of modern editing. For Robert Dalva (editor on such films as *The Black Stallion*, *Jumanji*, and *October Sky*), the challenge of collaboration is especially relevant when it comes to studio politics: “Sometimes you have to defend [the director] from some ideas and comments that are pretty silly. And you have to do it with grace and finesse” (personal communication, February 1, 2008). Tim Streeto directly associates this sort of “silliness” with the convenience of digital editing, and has some potent opinions of his own towards it, like when he says: “The downside of [digital editing] is that directors want to see everything, every crazy idea they get in the shower or that their agent suggests, because you can do it instantly.” However, Streeto goes on to say: “I’m an auteurist, and I really believe it’s the director’s film. The personalities that are difficult tend to be studio people, or on independent films, investors” (personal communication, February 10, 2008).

This is not to say, however, that directors are simple to collaborate with by comparison. Roger Barton admits that one of the trickiest parts of editing is the beginning of the post-production process, when the entire editing workflow changes gears. This is because “we’ve been autonomous during the whole shoot, and now the director comes in and begins to re-cut everything we’ve done...unless you’ve checked your ego at the door, it can be quite painful” (personal communication, May 10, 2008). But sometimes the problem is storytelling sense rather than ego, which can complicate things even more. An example of this is Anita Brandt-Burgoyne’s working relationship with Albert Brooks on

the 2005 film *Looking for Comedy in the Muslim World*. According to Burgoyne, as soon as she finished her preliminary cut of the film and Brooks first set foot in the editing room, “he never looked at my cut at all; he just jumped right in from the first scene, and I think that’s a big mistake. A director needs to get a feeling for the piece as a whole before starting to address its individual parts...but that’s Albert” (personal communication, January 10, 2008).

An editor might respond to this criticism by thinking that Burgoyne was lucky to work with such a unique director at all, and will be even luckier if that relationship continues...Robert Hoffman doesn’t hesitate to admit, “I owe my career to Terry Zwigoff” (personal communication, February 1, 2008). For a relationship like this to work, Mark Goldblatt claims: “It is important that when working with a new director that you are both on the same page as to the type of movie you are making. Otherwise, the process can become a very rocky road” (personal communication, February 3, 2008). As of 2008, Brooks has not directed another film since, and this would lend credence to one particular assertion from Glen Scantlebury: “The hardest thing to do is get on a good run with one director and do his movies...even directors have a hard time working all the time” (personal communication, January 24, 2008). This is because directing is believed to be one of the hardest, highest-pressure jobs of any career field in existence, which is especially true in the post-production process. According to Tim Streeto, “most of the crew spends a few weeks on [a] film, but the editor is in that room with the director for months. To me, this is the primary relationship” (personal communication, February 10, 2008).

In this context, Streeto would undoubtedly appear correct in his thinking, and Robert Dalva would likely agree with him when he states: “There is a deep bond between editor and director. The director is exposed in the cutting room...hence the depth of the relationship” (personal communication, February 1, 2008). A vast majority of editors believe that it is the editor’s job to cherish and support this exposed vulnerability, rather than embark on an ego-driven fight against it. An editor is the one post-production worker who can’t afford to be egotistical, according to Carol Littleton, who believes that the 60% of the editing process is “dealing with egos” (personal communication, January 15, 2008). Roger Barton reiterates that “film really is a director’s medium, and the truth is we’re all there to support that vision, even though we may not always agree on how to fulfill it” (May 10, 2008). Anita Brandt-Burgoyne claims her favorite part of editing is interpreting notes from collaborators as a “jumping-off point”, and then determining what changes should be made and how (personal communication, January 10, 2008). Bud Smith has built his career on services like this; he is one of the most famously ego-free editors in Hollywood, if his uncredited “editing doctor” status on 20 films and counting, and his claim that he’s open to “any suggestions from anyone” is any indication (personal communication, January 13, 2008).

Of course, “ego-free” people in Hollywood are very hard to come by, and most directors know this painfully well...which can be a problem for the editor. Directors arguably have a large responsibility to not let work-related stress unravel them, but it can sometimes be a losing battle. Barton claims “pressure can occasionally release itself in painful way[s] for anyone around [the director]... [it’s] simply the reality of the job” (personal communication, May 10, 2008). Editor Tony Lawson is evidently quite familiar

with this reality; Lawson claims that an editor regularly has moments “when you wish you were somewhere else, anywhere else...at such times [you] just remember, ‘It’s not life or death, it’s just a movie’” (personal communication, February 5, 2008). Of course, this is not the easiest mindset to accomplish when your day-to-day job is to “absorb lots of material and to have a strong point of view”, according to Kent Beyda (personal communication, January 28, 2008).

Irrationality and harsh behavior can be found among anyone in any workplace, but because film editors build their careers on objectivity and deep collaboration, they must be uncommonly conscientious in dealing with these personal traits. As a result, many editors believe it’s best to approach their work as a “to-do list” to stay focused on the film at hand, which introduces a number of different questions: What tasks comprise the day-to-day job of an editor? What does an editor’s workflow usually consist of? What sorts of mental processes are involved? This is a question that Dody Dorn, and all of the previous oft-quoted editors, were more than happy to thoroughly answer.

An Editor's Daily Grind

It was Dorn who provided a sample “to-do list” of tasks that she usually handles as an editor; many of these tasks are well-reinforced by the words of other editors. On any given day that Dorn works on a highly anticipated film (during the film’s shooting period), she would likely be focusing on any number of these assignments:

Dody Dorn’s “To-Do List”

- a. View dailies with the director and the DP
- b. Organize my material
- c. Edit scenes as they come in
- d. Continue editing other side projects as requested
- e. Edit music and sound as time allows
- f. Delegate duties of sound and music editing – review that work as it is completed
- g. Communicate info regarding visual effects
- h. Meet with director as requested
- i. Meet with other department heads to discuss needed materials
- j. Prepare references for other departments as requested
- k. Sit with other department heads to review materials as needed
- l. Provide lists for the director and the production team of any shots that are missing
- m. Alert the director to any pitfalls that editor sees developing during production

(personal communication, February 10, 2008)

One should note that these tasks come at a time that many film editors regard as comparatively easy, before the film's actual post-production begins; "[Post-production] does not begin simply when shooting is completed. Post-production staff members work steadily, if sometimes behind the scenes, throughout shooting" (Bordwell & Thompson, 1996, pp. 19-20). Virginia Katz enthuses, "I love the time when I'm cutting on my own...it's a peaceful time for me. Just me and my assistant" (personal communication, February 6, 2008). Anita Brandt-Burgoyne has similar insight into this "peaceful time": "My crew and I are really autonomous. We take lunch when we want and we come and go when we want. It's a nice, calm world." In contrast, Burgoyne regards the 10-week "director's cut" process of post-production with this sentiment: "What time we start; what time we have lunch (or don't), what time we stop for the day—no longer up to me" (personal communication, January 10, 2008). Joe Hutshing explains the director's cut process by stating: "You work closely with the director, honing and tweaking the film, going through the alternate performances, shaping the film and choosing music" (personal communication, February 6, 2008).

On a side note, it is a common myth in this country that career advancement is synonymous with less raw labor...in the field of film editing, this is clearly a fallacy. Dody Dorn worked hard for many years after high school as a receptionist, PA, extra, and assistant editor to be granted the hands-on responsibility she has a day-to-day basis, and even then, she has the director, producer(s), and studio executives to answer to (personal communication, February 10, 2008). The editor also has test screening audiences to please as well, and must make sure that they "understand what they're supposed to understand" (J. Hutshing, personal communication, February 6, 2008); Anita Brandt-

Burgoyne describes this as “nerve-wracking” (personal communication, January 10, 2008). Little wonder, then, that Tim Streeto has been in the company of “some very seasoned assistants who panicked once they got a job as an editor” (personal interview, February 10, 2008). This is not to say that assistant editors have an easy job, because editors happen to rely on them on a regular basis...this could most readily be described as “division of labor”, which is when “various jobs are assigned to different individuals. Even a single job may be broken down into smaller tasks, when they may be assigned to specialists.” (Bordwell & Thompson, 1996, p. 10)

According to Burgoyne, “assistants digitize dailies, [and] deal with visual, music, [and] sound effects”, and she goes as far as to say, “an efficient and capable assistant is an editor’s best friend” (personal communication, January 10, 2008). This is another assertion that Robert Dalva would wholeheartedly agree with, as evidenced by when he states: “It is important to me, and the film, to listen to your assistants. They can often have really good ideas” (personal communication, February 1, 2008). According to Paul Rubell, “the editor/assistant editor relationship is very important; a great assistant is hard to come by but can enhance the quality of an editor’s life” (personal communication, February 2, 2008). Even Dorn herself claims, “I like to let the first assistant editor interview and hire the remaining part of the [editing] team” (personal communication, February 10, 2008). Given all this, the seemingly straightforward job of film editing suddenly appears immensely group-driven and complex...however, that doesn’t stop editors like Bud Smith from regarding the daily editorial grind as “wak[ing] up in the morning and go[ing] to work” (personal communication, January 13, 2008).

But lo and behold, this is exactly how many editors in the business view their jobs at the start of each day. Glen Scantlebury has crafted a daily routine out of it: “A typical day for me starts late about 10am after I’ve hiked an hour in the morning, because otherwise you will get no exercise for the day. I then go into work and look at what I cut the day before, before going on and tackling new material.” Scantlebury finds that this helps him achieve the most elusive mindset of all for the film editor...the mindset of objectivity, which is a psychological holy grail of sorts. Despite Scantlebury’s best efforts, he admits that “if I re-work material from the day before, I often can improve a scene quickly in an hour or so...if I look at it a week later, [it] might take me half a day” (personal communication, January 24, 2008). Anita Brandt-Burgoyne has a similar creative process: “I find I often go back and rework the scenes I cut the first few days of shooting a few weeks later when I feel like I ‘know’ the characters a little better” (personal communication, January 10, 2008).

According to Mark Goldblatt, one of the biggest challenges of editing is “look[ing] at your edits with fresh eyes as often as possible; as the audience would, upon seeing it for the first time...my challenge is to keep a steady editing rhythm going, and [then] actually step aside mentally, and let the footage ‘edit itself’, if you will” (personal communication, February 3, 2008). Obviously, looking at a shot many times or spending half a day tweaking a scene all but destroys this goal, making it seem irrational to an average filmgoer as to why editors grind away like this to begin with. But there is a simple answer to that misconception: editing is one of the most psychologically immersive and borderline addictive careers in existence. Robert Dalva refers to editing as “subjective, from top to bottom” (personal communication, February 1, 2008). Roger

Barton has one confession to make in this regard: “This craft is so incredibly immersive that when I’m in a groove it’s really hard to keep track of time, and being home as promised can be a challenge” (personal communication, May 10, 2008). Considering the fact that Barton has a wife and a child, most 9-to-5 family breadwinners could easily disapprove of this admission...but, as previously stated, this loss of time is the sort of cost that filmmakers pay for the work they love to do, for an end result that has unparalleled potential to affect others.

All this hard work and all this sacrifice is always going towards a significant end result...the telling of a cinematic story. But when editors go into work every day to approach this task, how exactly do they use their tools, abilities, and to-do lists to do this? What is the basic intellectual process for the average film editor, “MTV-movie” controversy aside? This is also a question that these oft-quoted editors were happy to answer.

The Storytelling Challenges of Editing

Another noteworthy challenge of editing that Mark Goldblatt cites is “keep[ing] the story-line of the film ‘on-track’” no matter what kind of film that storyline may serve. According to Goldblatt: “You must keep the character arcs and pace consistent, and simultaneously not allow your audience to become bored” (personal communication, February 3, 2008). Anita Brandt-Burgoyne has arrived at a point in her career where she approaches comedy editing in a similar systematic fashion, if this quote is any indication: “I personally may find the timing of a joke works best if the punch line is delayed, so I’ll let it drag out as long as possible, because I think that’s how it will get the biggest laugh. Sometimes I find that very same joke may work just as well without waiting for the punch line...but I’ve learned to trust my instincts” (personal communication, January 10, 2008).

These “instincts” are highly valued among film editors...many of them have learned to stop worrying about their job skills and concern themselves with the story at hand. Robert Dalva states, with a great air of confidence, “I use my knowledge and experience minute by minute, day in and day out” (personal communication, February 1, 2008). For Tony Lawson, the question of editing skill is one of the last things on his mind, because “everyone is different; people have a multitude of ways to achieve often similar results” (personal communication, February 5, 2008). But when contemplating Robert Hoffman’s claim that an editor “can do 20 different versions of a scene...it can get confusing”, the storytelling traditions of editing fall under a completely new light (personal communication, February 1, 2008). Storytelling no longer seems like a natural process in this regard, but rather a mix-and-match jigsaw puzzle of sorts in which the

grand-scale solution is the paramount goal, and editing skill is far from the first thing that is considered. As Roger Barton claims, “It’s pretty easy to put a scene together, but it gets much, much harder when those scenes all play together...keeping the narrative drive intact without doing injury to character development” (personal communication, May 10, 2008).

For action editing, this jigsaw-puzzle notion is especially true. As a renowned action editor on many effects-heavy blockbusters, Barton knows this all too well. “As I’m cutting scenes, I have to bear in mind when [visual effects] shots will be used...close attention has to be paid to how many shots I’m cutting into the movie, because each of those shots can easily cost over a hundred grand, and some close to three times that...a pop”, Barton claims (personal communication, May 10, 2008). In drama editing, storytelling complications are hardly this pricey...but they have just as much thematic weight riding on them. Perhaps this is why Streeto’s favorite part of editing is watching dailies, when he formulates “this impossibly idealized version of the film in my head, before I discover the inevitable challenges in the material as I start cutting” (personal communication, February 10, 2008).

Virginia Katz prefers to deal with these challenges Streeto cites in as simple a manner as possible: “I screen the dailies, take detailed notes as to what readings I like...then just start cutting. I try not to overthink it... [I] pick a start point and go” (personal communication, February 6, 2008). Streeto casts his own insight into the nature of “overthinking” when he says, “[The] questions [of editing] are complicated and unique to each film, and really require an innate artistic sense and confidence to deal with” (personal communication, February 10, 2008). Tony Lawson takes on a similar attitude

when he humbly states: “The artistic challenges I welcome...they’re exciting, to remain open to my own and other people’s thoughts, [and] to interpret my feelings and emotions...it’s the reason for being there” (personal communication, February 5, 2008).

Robert Dalva has become quite accustomed to this “reason for being there” in his day and age, and has even learned to embrace the downsides of editing because of it. According to Dalva, “film editing is fun. It is like a giant puzzle, a puzzle with a structure that comes from the script...there are many solutions for the puzzle, it seems, but, in reality, there is only one: the one seen in the theaters around the world.” But in Dalva’s reasoning, there is one big string attached to this solution, and it consists of 1s and 0s: “We are now on the brink of a digital world. One has to keep up in order to stay competitive” (personal communication, February 1, 2008).

The Technical Challenges of Editing

Many veteran film editors have nostalgia for the days when film editing was a form of sewing...and strips of film were physically edited together with machines. According to David Bordwell, this process “is complicated and labor intensive. Trims of only a few frames can easily go astray, and if one decides to put them back one typically needs to request a new print of the footage” (p. 155). Today, digital editing systems “permit random access to the entire store of footage. The editor can call up any shot, paste it alongside any other shots, trim it, or junk it” (Bordwell & Thompson, 1996, p. 20). Obviously, veteran editors are struggling to keep up with this daunting revolution they never could have foreseen. Anita Brandt-Burgoyne confesses: “What trips me up most artistically is the constant changing of technology...I’m not a big computer geek type. On an Avid, I know how to do editing—that’s it. Ask me to make a DVD or create an EDL and I’m lost” (personal communication, January 10, 2008).

Tony Lawson expresses his technical plight with understatement: “The technical challenges just require learning and have to be accepted even though they’re irritating” (personal communication, February 5, 2008). Robert Hoffman, on the other hand, seems to thrive on these challenges. When he was editing a “nude model painting class” scene for Terry Zwigoff’s most recent film, *Art School Confidential*, Zwigoff lamented that the main character of the scene didn’t pause for a few seconds before painting...the problem was solved by digitally “freezing” the portion of the frame containing this character. This sort of technical syntax, however, can lead to interpersonal isolation from the editor's assistants and collaborators...but, according to Hoffman, this isolation can sometimes be construed as beneficial. “I must say I don't mind the isolation...your best friend becomes

the story you are telling, and who doesn't want to be truthful and fair to one's best friend?" Hoffman ponders (personal communication, July 15, 2008).

Today, almost anyone can imagine that filmmaking is a group effort not unlike that of a business partnership, or a football team led by an inspired captain...and in some ways, this is still true for the editing process. David Bordwell claims, "Rather than handle all the footage, the principal editor might supervise a team of several cutters, often making each responsible for one reel of the final cut" (p. 156). Tim Streeto owes his career to this sort of group-effort mentality: "There used to be a much more mentor/apprentice process to becoming an editor. One would be an assistant for years, hopefully latching onto a great editor for a few films, before eventually being given the opportunity to take the editor's chair on something" (personal communication, February 10, 2008). This was also true for Anita Brandt-Burgoyne: "I took a fairly standard path from apprentice, to assistant, to editor. People start their careers as editors now, without ever being an assistant of any kind...I'm not sure which is better" (personal communication, January 10, 2008).

It seems to be a scarier world out there for young editors, and it's clearly affecting our veteran editors...but, as Burgoyne sees it, new generations of editors now have unprecedented opportunities to learn basic editing skills as a result. "There are so many ways to explore editing on one's own. If you own a Mac that has Final Cut Pro or any editing system, you can learn pretty effectively how to do the job", Burgoyne says (personal communication, January 10, 2008). Surely, the likes of Glen Scantlebury wouldn't easily dispute Burgoyne's assertions, but Scantlebury continues to justly believe that "a lot of people have varying degrees of skill and success, sprinkled with a lot of

luck...a few rise up from being an assistant, but that's a much bigger crap-shot" (personal communication, January 24, 2008). Robert Hoffman would agree with Scantlebury when he states that an aspiring editor should "be ready for luck when it happens" (personal communication, February 1, 2008)...but many more ventures, goals, and personal advantages are needed to succeed in a dog-eat-dog town like Hollywood, CA.

Embracing the Unexpected: How an Editor Succeeds

As our society continues to evolve (and not just from analog to digital), it is believed that part of being successful in America is always knowing what you want to do with your life, and going after it with great ferocity until you've climbed a majestic career ladder. This is all well and good for film editors, and Virginia Katz agrees: "Don't take no for an answer. If you want something badly enough, just pursue it tirelessly. If it's your passion and your calling, then just go for it" (personal communication, February 6, 2008). But the truth is, many editors did not arrive at their careers through this exact philosophy...a surprising amount of renowned film editors were either born into their line of work, or gallantly stumbled into it. Anita Brandt-Burgoyne proclaims, "I am one of those people who knew what they wanted to do at a young age, because my dad was also a film editor. You'd be surprised how many second-generation editors there are in the 'biz'" (personal communication, January 10, 2008).

Unfortunately, Paul Rubell did not have this luxury when he obtained his English Lit. degree from UCLA, and "kicked around in various jobs" while seeking inspiration from his uncle's screenwriting and producing career. Then, one random conversation sealed Rubell's noteworthy fate: "One day, an assistant editor friend suggested that I take a job as apprentice editor. I knew nothing, but we faked a resume, and she taught me some rudimentary skills over the weekend...on Monday morning, I started my new career" (personal communication, February 2, 2008). Roger Barton might have a good chuckle at this story; Barton admits that after he did some dabbling in freelance television work, "I was offered my first Assistant Editor position on a 10-hour documentary... [which] would cut its teeth on a new system called the Avid...my problem was that I

knew nothing about it...during my interview, I did my best to use a list of key words I thought would impress anybody who didn't know better" (personal communication, May 10, 2008).

As you can see, a little bit of persistent risk is necessary for an aspiring editor to establish some mere semblance of a career. Joe Hutshing comically sums up the risk he took as "shitty cars [and] lots of roommates" (personal communication, February 6, 2008). The extent of Mark Goldblatt's risk was working whatever unpaid Hollywood jobs he could until he got his first editing job, although, according to Robert Hoffman, "all of us begin by working free" (personal communication, February 1, 2008). One day, Goldblatt found himself wandering into the lobby of Roger Corman's New World Pictures looking for work, and was told to speak to their head of advertising...to Goldblatt's pleasant surprise, "this fellow was an eclectic film buff like me, so we hit it off, and he offered me a job as a 'production assistant' on his upcoming film...for no pay." It was then that Goldblatt was able to establish the interpersonal connections he needed to land editing jobs on a series of low-budget (but also well-reviewed and profitable) films that would launch his distinguished career (personal communication, February 3, 2008). This employment desperation and unexpected good luck wouldn't surprise Roger Barton in the least...Barton firmly believes that "no matter what school or how much you've had, prepare yourself to start at the bottom" (personal communication, May 10, 2008).

By the time an editor obtains a solid career, one can easily imagine that editor having a series of preferred working habits that differs from editor to editor. At one point, Goldblatt reveals his own personal method of working: "[I] build select rolls of the bits of

performances that I prefer, paying special attention to what are the best takes...I try to get this select roll into some kind of script order, and proceed to edit the scene from the select roll” (personal communication, February 3, 2008). Roger Barton has a very similar method, which, on an interesting note, he developed under the mentorship of Goldblatt: “For me, building those select reels allows me to begin working with the footage during my first reactions...It’s the only time I’ll shut my door, because I really need to focus, not only on comparing line readings, but understanding where the important beats are, and coming up with clever ways to accentuate those moments” (personal communication, May 10, 2008). Dody Dorn has a similar scavenger-like approach to her editing, but with notable restraint in her thinking: “I first watch the dailies calmly without taking notes. I watch them again, taking notes. If possible, I watch them with the director...I start by pulling the pieces I like best and I put them together in sequence as scripted” (personal communication, February 10, 2008).

Robert Dalva has reached the point where he not only has established editing philosophies, but he also backs up those philosophies with conviction, as evidenced by when he says: “Don’t cut to music. Cut to the rhythm of the shot, not to the beat of the music” (personal communication, February 1, 2008). On the contrary, Tim Streeto claims, “I love cutting music, and cutting *to* music. I often talk to a director very early on about musical ideas, and get these into scenes as soon as possible” (personal communication, February 10, 2008). Glen Scantlebury has a similar sentiment, but it comes with a great deal of discipline that he had to learn the hard way: “I never cut with music until after I have assembled a scene. Francis Coppola always wanted to cut with music, get him in the mood. I realized the drawback was you would [let] the music drive

the pace, which is a mistake unless you are using that music in the final version (which you almost never are). Once you strip away the music, the edit can feel lumpy, as well as when the composer finally delivers music for the scene, he may not hit it as well as the temp track did, and you end up with an edit hanging in the wind” (personal communication, January 24, 2008).

But despite his opposition to music-driven rhythm, Robert Dalva still expresses music-related philosophies while ruminating about film editing, like when he says: “I think all good editors have to be good dancers” (personal communication, February 1, 2008). However, many editors tend to thrive on knowing when the editing should NOT “dance”, and when certain filmic moments should speak for themselves. Burgoyne has a strong philosophy in this regard: “If I can let an actor’s performance play in one shot and if it sustains that way, I believe that’s the way to go” (personal communication, January 10, 2008). This philosophy seems to make sense, and Bud Smith certainly believes so when he proudly cites a moment in William Friedkin’s *Cruising*, where he held on a two-minute shot of Paul Sorvino’s police captain character having an emotional breakdown, without any cuts whatsoever (personal communication, January 13, 2008).

But for Roger Barton, one of his greatest personal difficulties has nothing to do with the editing rhythms he creates...but rather the rhythm of his legs while he’s doing that editing. Barton confesses: “While I’m sitting at work, I have a condition referred to as ‘Avid leg’...I’m never aware I’m doing it, but when I’m really focused on something, my legs will involuntarily bob up and down at high speeds.” Fortunately for Barton, this unusual “condition” has an equally unusual networking advantage: “I was having a nice dinner with my wife a few months ago and a director I had worked with years ago spotted

me from behind and across the restaurant...because of my 'Avid leg'" (personal communication, May 10, 2008). In the words of Robert Hoffman, "being a bit OCD is good" if you're an editor (personal communication, February 1, 2008). Additionally, Anita Brandt-Burgoyne reiterates that networking is always the way to go in the editing field, no matter how outlandish that networking may be..."It's a networking business. Never alienate anyone" (personal communication, January 10, 2008).

Barton acknowledges that networking has gotten him far in life as an action editor, but he also admits a slight regret as to the limitations of this networking: "For better or worse, people see me primarily as an action movie film editor. I suppose it's my own fault for continuing to accept to do them, but they're so damn fun I often can't help myself! I suppose because of my skill set, I'm a good candidate for them, but what I'd like people to know is that my skill set goes beyond that to include a real passion for drama, which is the driving force behind any good film" (personal communication, May 10, 2008). Barton is not alone in his career status; comedy editors like Anita Brandt-Burgoyne also appear restrained in their editing oeuvres. But editors like Mark Goldblatt and Glen Scantlebury thrive on the eclectic nature of every film that comes their way, regardless of any gravitation towards certain genres; nothing stops them from constantly making the most of what they have to offer. Joe Hutshing describes the rewards at the end of every editing job when he says: "I enjoy telling a story, and editing is where it's all decided. I enjoy knowing my contribution was a part of the film, [and] seeing my work on the screen in front of hundreds of people...the paycheck isn't bad, either" (personal communication, February 6, 2008).

Conclusion

This essay is a mere glimpse into the world of motion picture editing; the editing process on every film is bound to be hugely different. But given the fact that all films are different, and every creative soul behind those films is meant to differ from one another, why should the editing experience be the same for every film? In this sense, one can easily argue that the only way to glimpse into the iconoclastic life of an editor is to become one. In today's generation of DVD extras and Internet gossip leaks, many believe that any young filmmaker can now learn about all kinds of professional filmmaking from the comforts of home. But a Hollywood edit suite is a place where paparazzi, reporters, and behind-the-scenes cameramen are rarely found, and even they aren't equipped to understand or convey what editing is. Sure, one might be able to get an idea of it by playing with editing software, just as one can get an idea of what painting is by playing with finger paints, but there's a vast, exciting world of creativity happening in Hollywood edit suites that only professional filmmakers can fully experience.

Obviously, the process of editing can be compared to many more processes than painting. Dody Dorn claims that editing "is a lot like archeology. I need to be able to take all the clues and find the bigger picture" (personal communication, February 10, 2008). Roger Barton believes that editing "is really a subtractive art much like sculpting, but instead of peeling away layers of marble or clay to reveal something meaningful, we're cutting away miles of film to reveal essentially the same thing" (personal communication, May 10, 2008). But Robert Hoffman equates an editor to an illusionist; Hoffman fondly recalls attending a test screening of one of his films, and seeing the audience collectively react to a quick-cut shot of a knife coming in contact with a

character's hand. According to Hoffman, "The knife never touched the hand, but they jump, and I laugh and think 'I fooled you'" (personal communication, February 6, 2008).

According to Robert Dalva, however, an editor should also be considered a "story mover". Dalva learned this on a seemingly ordinary day as a student at the University of Southern California: "The faculty showed us a film called 'Make It Move' ...I am pretty sure they showed it to us simply because of the title...that is my film editing mantra: make it move" (personal communication, February 1, 2008). Because this movement is so taken for granted by filmgoers, editing continues to be one of the most obscure, yet influential parts of the filmmaking process. Anita Brandt-Burgoyne carries a potent warning, however, about becoming involved in professional film editing: "You have to be prepared to stay in it for the long haul. It's a long, arduous road and there will be setbacks and disappointments, but the people who get up to accept Academy Awards for Feature Film Editing are those who have usually toiled for many years and who have faced many obstacles along the way" (personal communication, January 10, 2008).

Paul Rubell has a cautionary insight of his own about the considerable learning curve of editing: "It took maybe 15-20 years before I felt I really knew what I was doing" (personal communication, February 2, 2008). Perhaps this explains why Jay Cassidy (editor on such films as *The Pledge*, *An Inconvenient Truth*, and *Into the Wild*) regularly offers this advice to his children: "Stay out of L.A. until you've developed your craft; but remember, nothing you do in the hinterlands counts once you get here" (personal communication, January 13, 2008). Of course, it is the "hinterlands" that filmmaking exists to serve, and it is editors who conjure up this cinematic magic out of smoke, mirrors and well-timed cuts.

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