

Most with the Least

You can never judge the quality of a sound mix simply by counting the number of tracks it took to produce it. Terrible mixes have been produced from a hundred tracks. By the same token, wonderful mixes have been made from only three tracks. It depends on the initial choices that were made, the quality of the sounds, and how capable the blend of those sounds was of exciting emotions hidden in the hearts of the audience. The underlying principle: Always try to do the most with the least—with the emphasis on *try*. You may not always succeed, but *attempt* to produce the greatest effect in the viewer's mind by the least number of things on screen. Why? Because you want to do only what is necessary to engage the imagination of the audience—suggestion is always more effective than exposition. Past a certain point, the more effort you put into wealth of detail, the more you encourage the audience to become spectators rather than participants. The same principle applies to all the various crafts of filmmaking: acting, art direction, photography, music, costume, etc.

And, of course, it applies to editing as well. You would never say that a certain film was well-edited

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-

pens to me, it is usually because I have been looking at the image as the miniature it is in the editing room, rather than seeing it as the mural that it will become when projected in a theater. Something that will quickly restore the correct perspective is to imagine yourself very small, and the screen very large, and pretend that you are watching the finished film in a thousand-seat theater filled with people, and that the film is beyond the possibility of any further changes. If you still like what you see, it is probably okay. If not, you will now most likely have a better idea of how to correct the problem, whatever it is. One of the tricks I use to help me achieve this perspective is to cut out little paper dolls—a man and a woman—and put one on each side of the editing screen. The size of the dolls (a few inches high) is proportionately correct to make the screen seem as if it is thirty feet wide.

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Seeing Around the Edge of the Frame

The film editor is one of the few people working on the production of a film who does not know the exact conditions under which it was shot (or has the *ability* not to know) *and* who can at the same time have a tremendous influence on the film.

If you have been on and around the set most of the time, as the actors, the producer, director, cameraman, art director, etc., have been, you can get caught up in the sometimes bloody practicalities of gestation and delivery. And then when you see the dailies, you can't help, in your mind's eye, seeing around the edge of the frame—you can imagine everything that was there, physically and emotionally, just beyond what was actually photographed.

"We worked like hell to get that shot, it has to be in the film." You (the director, in this case) are convinced that what you got was what you wanted, but there's a possibility that you may to forcing yourself to see it that way because it cost so much—in money, time, angst—to get it.

By the same token, there are occasions when you shoot something that you dislike, when everyone is in a bad mood, and you say under protest: "All right, I'll do this, we'll get this one close-up, and then it's a wrap." Later on, when you look at that take, all you can remember was the hateful moment it was shot, and so you may be blind to the potentials it might have in a different context.

The editor, on the other hand, should try to see only what's on the screen, as the audience will. Only in this way can the images be freed from the context of their creation. By focusing on the screen, the editor will, hopefully, use the moments that should be used, even if they may have been shot under duress, and reject moments that should be rejected, even though they cost a terrible amount of money and pain.

I guess I'm urging the preservation of a certain kind of virginity. Don't *unnecessarily* allow yourself to be impregnated by the conditions of shooting. Try to keep up with what's going on but try to have as little specific knowledge of it as possible because, ultimately, the audience knows nothing about any of this—and you are the ombudsman for the audience.

The director, of course, is the person most familiar with all of the things that went on during the shoot, so he is the most burdened with this surplus, beyond-the-frame information. Between the end of shooting and before the first cut is finished, the very best thing that can happen to the director (and the film) is that he say goodbye to everyone and disappear for two weeks—up to the mountains or down to the sea or out to Mars or somewhere—and try to discharge this surplus.

Wherever he goes, he should try to think, as much as possible, about things that have absolutely nothing to do with the film. It is difficult, but it is necessary to create a barrier, a cellular wall between shooting and editing. Fred Zinnemann would go climbing in the Alps after the end of shooting, just to put himself in a potentially life-threatening situation where he had to be *there*, not day-dreaming about the film's problems.

Then, after a few weeks, he would come down from the Alps, back to earth; he would sit down in a dark room, alone, the arc light would ignite, and he would watch his film. He would still be, inherently, brimming with those images from beyond the edge of the frame (a director will never be fully able to forget them), but if he had gone straight from shooting to editing, the confusion would be worse and he would have gotten the two different thought processes of shooting and editing irrevocably mixed up.

Do everything you can to help the director erect this barrier for himself so that when he first sees the film, he can say, "All right, I'm going to pretend that I had nothing to do with this film. It needs some work. What needs to be done?"

And so you try as hard as you can to separate out what you wish from what is actually there, never abandoning your ultimate dreams for the film, but trying as hard as you can to see what is actually on the screen.